

Abram's Daughters 03 The Sacrifice

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Beverly Lewis

The Sacrifice (Abram's Daughters Series, #3) The Sacrifice (Abram's Daughters Series, #3) The Sacrifice

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Beverly Lewis

Cover design by Dan Thornberg

The portion of a poem cited in chapter thirty-four is as quoted in A Joyous Heart

by Corrie Bender, published by Herald Press of Scottdale, Pennsylvania, in 1994-

The author of the poem is unknown.

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Published by Bethany House Publishers

11400 Hampshire Avenue South

Bloomington, Minnesota 55438

Bethany House Publishers is a Division of '.

Bilker Book House Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

./: ' Printed in the United States of America

;,: ; ISBN 0-7642-2875-7 (Hardcover)6Cf) A y

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!., . For , :., ,;

:'''' Jeannette Green, '

wonderful friend and "sister."

Beautiful in every way.

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Abram's Daughters

The Covenant

\; The Betrayal

The Sacrifice

The Heritage of Lancaster County

; The Shunning ; v

The Confession , ,

1 ,,, , The Reckoning ,,

The Postcard

The Crossroad

The Redemption of Sarah Cain

October Song

Sanctuary*

The Sunroom

The Beverly Lewis Amish Heritage Cookbook

www.beverlylevois.com

*with David Lewis8BEVERLY LEWIS, born in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country, fondly recalls her growing-up years. A keen interest in her mother's Plain family heritage has led Beverly to set many of her popular stories in Lancaster County.

A former schoolteacher and accomplished pianist, Beverly is a member of the National League of American Pen Women (the Pikes Peak branch) and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She is the 2003 recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Award at Evangel University, Springfield, Missouri, and her blockbuster novel, *The Shunning*, recently won the Gold Book Award. Her bestselling novel *October Song* won the Silver Seal in the Benjamin Franklin Awards, and *The Postcard and Sanctuary* (a collaboration with her husband, David) received Silver Angel Awards, as did her delightful picture book for all ages, *Annika's Secret Wish*. Beverly and her husband have three grown children and one grandchild and make their home in the Colorado foothills. 9/Jyis-0-4,'&

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Summer 1949

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v_>ome June, the first song of the whippoorwill reminds me of berry picking . . . and bygone days. Although it has been over two years since Jonas Mast left for Ohio, I still wonder about him, along with my older sister, Sadie, and am able to pray for their happiness more readily than at first.

Especially now, at summer's onset, when strawberries are ripe and ready for pies and preserves, I think of Jonas. He loved strawberry-rhubarb pie like nobody's business, and both his mamma and mine made it for him with sugar and raw honey, so it was nothing short of wonderful-good. "Desserts ;ire s'posed to be plenty sweet," Mamma has said for as long as I can remember. This, with her irresistible wide-eyed smile. These days Sadie is the one baking such delicious fruit pies for Jonas.

Now and again I feel almost numb for the way things turned out between Jonas, Sadie, and me. Close as I was to each of them, it seems they should have cared enough to send some word early on prior to Bishop Bontrager's strict decree offering an explanation. Anything would've been¹⁰

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better than this dreadful silence. It's the not knowing how things got so verkehrt topsy-turvy that causes the most frustration in me. The lack of word from Ohio confirms my worst fears. I expect even now Sadie probably wonders if I have any idea she is married to Jonas, or that I feel strongly she stole him away from me. How on earth does she live with herself?

I'm slowly accepting the split between my beau and me, since it would be wrong to pine for a man who belongs to another. Most folk just assume I've passed the worst of it and am moving on with life. They will never know truly, because I tend to go about things rather cheerfully . . . and, too, so much time has passed since that devastating autumn. It does still puzzle me, if I think on it, how one minute we were so happily planning our wedding, and then, clear out of the blue, a most peculiar letter arrived saying Jonas suspected Gideon Peachey of carrying a torch for me. Even though I promptly wrote to reassure him of my devotion and love, I never again heard from him. Downright baffling it is.

Of course, if Jonas were privy to my present friendship with Smithy Gid, he might have a little something to go on. But, back then, nothing was further from the truth. Fact was, my heart belonged wholly to Jonas, and nothing and no one could make me think otherwise. Not Smithy Gid, nor his sister

Adah, my closest friend. Not even dear Dat and Mamma, though my father has long hoped Gid might one day win my affections.

With the revelation of Aunt Lizzie's secret to me to Mary Ruth and Hannah, too my father's and grandfather's health seems much improved and both Mamma and Aunt

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Lizzie have a new spring in their step, in spite of the vacant spot at the supper table. Sadie's absence is a constant source of worry, especially since she's been shunned from the Gobbler's Knob church. And Dat was right; the bishop after a reasonable time insisted Sadie's letters be returned unopened. It's no wonder she stopped writing along about C Christmastime after leaving for Ohio. I wish to heavens I might've been allowed to read those things she wrote to us.

Some days it seems as if my sister has been away for years on end. But if that were true, I'd be thought of as a maidel by now, which I'm surely not. I am still only nineteen a few years under the limit of the expected marrying age though if Smithy Gid had his way, he and I would be hitched up already.

The berry patch calls to me even now as I help Dat with morning milking. Seems there's something nearly sacred about creeping along the mounded rows, the blissful buzz of nature in my ears, long runners tripping at my bare feet as the blistering sun stands high and haughty in the sky and the tin bucket steadily fill[^] with plump red fruit. Being out there alone with the birds and the strawberry plants, beneath the wide and blue heavenly canopy, soothes my soul and sets my world aright. At least for a time . . .

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What doth the Lord require of thee,

but to do justly, and to love mercy,

and to walk humbly with thy God?

Micah 6:8 15^I*'''

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If in the morning Mamma quietly announced her baby news, Leah hung back a bit, standing near the kitchen door, while Bier twin sisters, especially Mary Ruth, were overjoyed at Mamma's being in the family way again. Many of the Old fcrder viewed it as shameful to share such things with unmarftied children, but both Mamma and Dat felt otherwise and Eiden't hesitate to include their four eldest daughters, though (Hiscreetly.

"Since Lydiann's* a toddler and not so little anymore, it'll uhe fun to have a baby around again," declared Mary Ruth. I "And wonderful-gut for Lydiann to have a close-in-age

['brother or sister." Hannah's smile stretched from ear to ear as

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jtghe seemingly took the news in her stride, much as Dat must surely have, too, when Mamma told him in private earlier.

Leah had suspected nothing of this from Dat, although

I ic'd had plenty of opportunity to say something during early -

' morning chores. Her father had never been one to speak of personal things; she knew this firsthand, because, for some

time now, she had been asking for information relating to her

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own birth, to no avail. "For goodness' sake, Leah," he would say each time she brought it up, "be grateful the Good Lord made you healthy and strong, that you were born headfirst. What else wouldja care to know?"

But there were certain things she did ponder, such as who her first father might be. Lizzie, however, seemed unable to discuss the subject. Is it too hard to dredge up the past? Leah wondered. Or was Lizzie simply unwilling to bring it up for fear of implicating a member of the Hickory Hollow Amish church, miles away? There were also nagging questions concerning the day Leah was born in the Ebersol Cottage, but she couldn't bear to ask them of Lizzie.

Mary Ruth broke the stillness, glancing furtively at Leah as she said, "Maybe Dat will finally get a real son."

"Aw, pity's sake," Mamma said, shaking her head at Mary Ruth. She went to sit on the wooden bench next to the kitchen table, fanning herself with the hem of her long black apron. Her round face was flushed from the heat of the wood stove, where she had two strawberry pies baking.

"But ... if the baby is a girl," Hannah spoke up, "there'll be less sewing to do."

Leah spoke at last. "Only if we get busy and make plenty of little afghans 'tween now and December. Lydiann was a spring baby, don't forget."

At this Leah caught Mamma's sweet and gentle smile. "That's my Leah, always leaning toward the practical."

Mary Ruth continued to chatter, asking where Lydiann would sleep once the wee one came.

Quickly Hannah suggested, "Why, she can sleep with us. Ain't so, Mary Ruth?" , > ;: ^

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I Mamma laughed at that. "I daresay there wouldn't be In inch sleeping goin' on. Not as wiggly as that one is!" I Leah turned and slipped outdoors, going to the hen house, where she scattered feed to the chickens. Inside, she leaned Iftgninst the rickety wall, watching them peck the ground near IIht bare feet. "Honestly," she said right out, "I don't know whether to be happy or sad about a new baby."

The hens paid her no mind, but the lone rooster cocked his head and eyed her curiously. In all truth, she had forced a smile about Mamma expecting a little one come next Christinas. Here, with only the chickens for company, she recalled (he months before two-year-old Lydiann came into the world. Mamma had been ever so tired . . . nauseated, too. At close In forty-five, she was not nearly as energetic and strong as in years past, but there were a good many women that age or older in the family who had no trouble birthing babies. Leah was glad her mother came from a long line of such women.

11 uleed, she was happy at the prospect of Dat's having his first son should the baby turn out to be a boy.

Heading qSt of the hen house toward the barnyard, Leah was suddenly aware of Smithy Gid calling to her from the brink of the cornfield. "Wie geht's, Leah. Do ya have a minule?"

Out of habit, she glanced toward the back door, curious if Mamma or one of the twins was observing her with Gid, who was not only breathless from running, but his eyes were strangely aglow. "What is it?" she asked.

He grinned down at her. "I've got a whole new litter of German shepherd pups, and I think there's another dog Abram your pop might just take a shinin' to."

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It was common knowledge Dat wanted a third dog, after having purchased from Gid his second German shepherd, Blackie, well over a year ago. "With a houseful of women folk, another male dog might be worth thinkin' about. 'Least I won't be so outnumbered anymore," he'd said that very morning, chuckling heartily.

She walked alongside Gid to the barn, listening as he described the various puppies' coloring.

"Does Dat know about the recent pups?" she asked.

"He oughta, 'cause I ain't been talkin' to myself all these weeks." They both laughed at that; then Gid added, "I believe Abram's just waitin' for the gut word."

She felt her cheeks warm. "Then you best be tellin' him."

His eyes lit up. "Well, now, I wanted to tell you, Leah."

She held her breath, scared he might take this opportunity to say more, them alone this way.

And he did, too ... at least started to. "I've been wantin' to ask ya something."

She took a small step back. In fact, she had been inching away from him, romantically at least, her whole life long, and for all good reason. She had always loved her second cousin Jonas, though she had made a conscious effort to bury her bitter sadness, hiding it from her family and especially from Smithy Gid, who remained a right good friend as he'd always been even more so lately. Yet Leah shuddered at the thought of Gid showing

kindness to her out of mere pity. Surely their friendship was more special than that. But she had no intention of leading him on just because he was clearly fond of her.

Ach,, she groaned inwardly, wishing someone anyone

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might come flying into the barn. But no one did, and not when the barn doves, high in the rafters, made a sound as the Httllthy's son reached for her hand. "Uh, Gid . . ." What she rBttlly wanted to tell him was please don't say another word, but the words got trapped in her throat. She knew all too well the ftl'he of' rejection, and the way his eyes were intent on hers

11 ist now, it would be downright unkind to hurt him.

I !c was still holding her hand as the slow creaking of the windmill behind the barn broke the stillness. "Adah and her I- .in are going for supper in Strasburg next Saturday night. I

11 ii night it might be fun if you and I rode along."

No two ways about it, riding along simply meant double ' Mining and Gid knew it. Sighing, she gently pulled her hand iwuy, staring down at her toes. What should I say?

"If you want to talk it over with Adah, I don't mind." His words were like thin reeds in a swamp compared to his usual If-assured manner. Inside, Smithy Gid was most likely standing on tiptoes. Furthermore, she suspected he had been ever i> eager to spend an evening with her for quite some time, hoping to double tip with her first cousin Sam Ebersol, Uncle jil'sse's youngest son, along with Gid's sister Adah. But Leah also knew Gid wouldn't be asking her twice. If she didn't give her answer now, she'd have to seek him out in the next day i >r so. Because at twenty-two three years her elder Smithy I lid was to be treated with the respect he deserved.

"I'll think on it." She trembled, afraid he might take her reply as a maybe.

Truth be told, she figured he was working his way to ask her to go "for steady," and right soon. To be true to herself, hhe knew she ought to refuse. Yet looking on the bright side,

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allowing Gid to court her would convince the People, espedaily Mamma and Aunt Lizzie, that she'd regained her balance, so to speak, that her shattered heart was on the mend. Wasn't it about time for that, anyway? Jonas was happy with someone else; why shouldn't she marry, as well? And, too, it had been ingrained in her all her days that to follow the Lord God's will for her life, she must marry and bear many children, as many as the Good Lord saw fit to give her and her future husband.

One thing was sure, Leah enjoyed her barn chats with Gid while pitching hay to the field mules or redding up the haymow for summertime Preaching services. It was downright pleasant to have a young man of Gid's reputation thinking of her as a good friend. Other times, she almost wished he might fix his gaze on a girl whose heart was truly available, like, for instance, any number of her cousins dozens of Ebersols to choose from in Gobbler's Knob alone.

Naturally Gid wanted to marry well before his sister Adah. Even his youngest sister, Dorcas, was seeing someone seriously, or so Adah had confided in Leah recently. A knotty problem for Gid, being the eldest of the family and the only son and still unmarried, though it was clear thus far he'd set his cap for no one other than Leah.

Daily this weighed heavily on her mind, especially because Smithy Gid was such a fine young man. Why should she forfeit having a family of her own just because things between her and Jonas had fizzled? She could simply marry the farm boy who'd waited for her all these years, couldn't she?

She watched Smithy Gid walk back through the cornfield, holding her breath and not knowing for sure the right answer

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fu his invitation. I'll ask Mamma what to do, she thought and headed out the barn door. .

Leah found Mamma in the potting shed, fanning herself. "Another hot day, ain't?"

To this her mother nodded, and Leah began to share her uncertainty. "Smithy Gid invited me to go ridin' with him, Miiinma. What do you think 'bout that if you were me, I mean?"

Mamma moved the potting soil around in the earthen jar In-fore speaking. She stopped her work and looked at Leah with a fond expression. "Seems to me if you care the least at all for him, why not see where it leads? He's a right nice young man."

" 'Tis easy to see Dat thinks so," Leah offered. She wouldn't ask for a comparison between Gid and Jonas; Mamma had made it known years ago how fond she was of Jonas. e

"Far as I can tell, Gid's been sweet on you for a long time."

She thought on that. "Honestly there are times I think it would be fun to go somewhere with Gid, at least with another couple along."

Mamma's blue eyes grew more serious, and she set about cleaning the potting soil off the wooden work counter with a hand brush and dustpan. "Sometimes I wonder if you care for Gid simply because his sister is your dearest friend. Have you ever considered that?" > v : ' :

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"Adah has little to do with Gid's and my friendship," Leah said quickly. The smithy's son had happily befriended her during her darkest days. They had even gone walking at dusk several times, but mostly their conversations took place in the cow pasture. She worried if allowing herself to warm to

his winning smile might in some way betray the depth of love she'd had for Jonas.

"Just so Gid understands where your heart is," Mamma said.

Light streamed in through the windows, casting sunny beams onto the linoleum floor.

Where your heart is ...

Leah sighed. "Whatever do you mean?"

Mamma sat tall and still, her gaze intent on Leah. "I think you know, dear. Deep within you, a voice is whispering what you should or should not do."

"I can't come right out and tell Smithy Gid that I don't love him as a beau, can I? How cruel that would be."

"You might say instead you think of him as a close brother."

Knowing Gid as she did, if she revealed this truth, he might take it as a challenge to try harder still to win her. "Oh, Mamma, I don't know what to say, honest I don't."

"Then say nothing . . . until you're sure. The Lord will give you the right words when the time comes. God holds the future in His hands . . . always remember this."

Mamma was as wise as any woman she knew Mamma and Aunt Lizzie both. She thanked the Lord above for allowing her to grow up close to such women, though if she'd had her druthers, she would have preferred to know early on that

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ILlMlt* Bivnneman was the woman who'd birthed her. But to

MWt'll mi ill is was futile.

I Mamma's words nudged her back to the present. "Why
if I think Adah how she thinks her brother might react."

I "I've thought of that, but I can't bring myself to open my
mouth and say what I oughta."

I Mamma frowned momentarily. "That's not the Leah I
know."

I Leah forced a smile. Maybe what Mamma was trying to
say was Don't settle for a Gideon Peachey if your heart longs for
a better man.

I So ill, she refused to let Mamma or anyone see the depth
of her bewilderment that plagued her. It was as if her feet had
become long tendrils, like the runners that sometimes
kicked her in the berry patch, making it impossible to move
forward, tangling her way, keeping her from progressing on
her path of her life.

I "Are you afraid I'll never marry ... if I pass up Gid's affec-
tion?" she asked suddenly.

I "Not afraid, really," Mamma replied. "Just awful sorry if
you're not happy in your choice of a husband. 'Tis better to
be a contented maid like your aunt Lizzie than a miser-

nb\c wife, ya know."

I Leah had heard similar remarks at the quilting frolics she
Illiul her twin sisters attended with Mamma; seemed there was
Inn overabundance of spontaneous advice from the women
Ifolk nowadays. But the overall bent of Amish life, at least for
In woman, was to marry and have a large family. Anything less
Iwns a departure from what the People expected.

I All of a sudden she felt overcome with fatigue. The

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potting shed had trapped the hot air, and she longed for the cool mossy
green of the shaded front yard.

Politely she offered to help Mamma with the rest of her planting, but her
mother shook her head.

"Go and have yourself some time alone," she said. "Goodness knows, you
must need a rest."

Leah kissed Mamma's cheek and walked around the south-

east side of the house, admiring the clear pink hydrangea bushes flourishing
there. She sat on the ground and rested in the shadow of an ancient maple,
daydreaming that Jonas had never, ever left Gobbler's Knob for his
carpentry apprenticeship in Ohio.

Everything would be so different now. . . .

Yet she refused to give in to her emotions. Something as innocent as a daydream was wrong, she knew. Jonas belonged to Sadie now, and she to him.

"God holds the future in His hands." Mamma's confident words echoed in her mind.

Mosquitoes began to bite her ankles, and the sound of the noontime dinner bell prompted her to rouse herself and paste on yet another pleasant face. Leah rose and trudged toward the house.

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It was Sunday evening the air was so fresh and sweet it was hard

to imagine a better place to be on such a fine

day. She rode next to Hannah down Georgetown Road in

the family buggy, chattering on the way to the singing. Once

again, Aunt Lizzie had offered to drive, drop them off, and

bring them home with the carriage, since there were no brothers

to do the favor. Ever since February, when they turned sixteen

, she became eligible to attend Sunday singings, Lizzie had

been kind enough eager to drive them.

It had crossed Mary Ruth's mind to ask Leah to take them

to the singing, but with Leah past her rumschprunge and a bap-

tist church member, she was no longer expected to go to the singings, though she was welcome if she desired to, since she was still single. Mary Ruth couldn't help but wonder if she might have an awful

slim chance of marrying now, unless, of course, she succumbed to Smithy
Gid.

Mary Ruth felt sure Leah was still in mourning for Jonas, despite that
everlasting smile of hers; her sister's cheerful mood didn't fool Mary Ruth
one bit.

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All in all, Aunt Lizzie was a much better choice for taking them to singings.
One thing annoyed Mary Ruth, though their aunt seemed a little too
interested in who rode home with whom. Especially here lately, since the
Stoltzfus boys had been bringing the twins home long past midnight every
other Saturday. The grown-ups in the house were supposed to play dumb;
the age-old custom of turning a deaf ear and a blind eye.

"Do you think Ezra and Elias will bring only one courting buggy to singin'
again?" Mary Ruth whispered to her twin, eyes wide with anticipation. "It's
such fun double courting, ain't so?"

To this Hannah smiled, shrugging her shoulder and looking nervously at
Aunt Lizzie.

Hundreds of lightning bugs blinked over the cornfield like stars fallen
glittery white from the heavens as the carriage headed downhill toward
Grasshopper Level. A lone doe crept out at dusk and stood on the edge of
the woods and watched them pass, as though hesitant to cross a road just
claimed by a spirited steed.

"Elias has eyes only for you," Hannah whispered back. "If ya didn't know
already."

Mary Ruth reached for her sister's hand and squeezed it. "I should say the
same for you 'bout Ezra."

Aunt Lizzie turned her head just then and smiled. "What're you two twittering about?"

"Ach, best not to say, Aendi," Mary Ruth said quickly.

"Well, s'posin' I try 'n' guess," Aunt Lizzie taunted jovially, wispy strands of her dark hair loose at the brow. ,

Mary Ruth frowned. "Let's talk 'bout something/else."

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Their aunt caught on and clammed up, and that was that.

11 nth whs, neither Mary Ruth nor Hannah felt comfortable h<lllliH Lizzie that the Stoltzfus boys were ever so fond of thttWi Since Ezra and Elias were less than a year and a half HJWfi If was fascinating they should be double-courting. "It's iilliWH' like we're going 'for steady' with twin boys, they're so

* li'Kt In age," Mary Ruth had declared to Hannah in the prii ii-y til' their bedroom last week.

"Not only that, but if we end up married . . . our children will hf double cousins." Shy Hannah's pretty brown eyes had tlniiml at that.

Yesterday afternoon, while stemming strawberries and,

; Itlfir, picking peas, Mamma had hinted she'd heard only a sin-

^Ir bulj|gy bringing her dear girls home here lately. Which, of

tJuin'M1, could mean just one thing: the boys were either the

Ml i >l friends and using the same open buggy ... or they were

^BiIuts.

Hi Naturally, with the secrecy surrounding the courting years,

11 "Mi mother knew better than to mention much else. Yet
I "'d said it with a (most mischievous smile and out of earshot
ul Diit. At the time Mary Ruth had noticed how pretty
Miltma looked, her face beaming with joy. Was it because
jlli! was with child once again? The women folk often whis-
HBtd at canning bees and such that a woman in the family
^H had "a certain glow."

HJ Or ... maybe it had more to do with Mary Ruth showing HJ Interest in a
nice Amish boy; maybe that's what made Hniina smile these days. If so,
then surely their mother Hftn't nearly as worried as she had been at the end
of the Hjflt)' eighth grade, a full year ago. The evening of graduation

28from the Georgetown School, Mary Ruth had out-and-out declared, "I
want to attend high school next year!"

However, the very next day Dat had surprised her by taking her aside and
talking mighty straight. "Hold your horses now, Mary Ruth." He'd asked her
to wait until her rumschpringe to decide such a thing, so this past year she
had continued to work three days a week for their Mennonite neighbor,
Dottie Nolt, doing light housekeeping and occasional baby-sitting for the
Nolts' adopted son, Carl. Along with that, she helped Mamma, as did
Hannah and Leah, tending to the family and charity gardens, cleaning
house, keeping track of busy Lydiann, and attending quilting frolics. Now
that she was courting age, she was also going to Sunday singings with
Hannah, who was taking baptismal instruction without her a terrible sore
spot between them.

Since she was "running around" now, Mary Ruth was able to openly read
for pleasure, as well as study books at home, but the novelty of getting
together with other Plain young people, especially fine-looking boys, had
tempered her intense craving for escape into the world of English characters

and settings. If she wanted to experience the modern world, she didn't have to rely on fiction any longer. Besides, it was great fun spending time with Elias Stoltzfus, who was as much a free spirit as she, within the confines of the Plain community, of course. She loved riding in his open courting buggy through Strasburg and the outskirts of Lancaster, soaring fast as they could through the dark night though always in the company of Hannah and Ezra.

"How's Dottie Nolt these days . . . and her little one?" Aunt Lizzie asked unexpectedly. , ,,,, . . . ,,, ,,,

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"(tori moves right quick round the house. Dottie has to I'lih li linn awful close," Mary Ruth readily replied. I :\' 'spi'ti so. He's what two now?" :

I ' .1 it- 11< >dded. "A delightful child, but he's definitely on the li

I Ilic lu)rse turned off the road and headed down a long l|iI Line, coming up on the old clapboard farmhouse. Aunt ll-vic pulled on the reins, and the carriage came to a stop. IWt'll, ii certainly looks like a nice gathering of young folks." I Mary Ruth was happy to see the big turnout. What a Mkk'i'lul-good night for a barn singing, not to mention the tic afterward under the stars with Elias. "Come along, Hanblii," She hopped down out of the carriage. "Denki, Aunt liMid!" she called over her shoulder.

I "Hon't worry a smidgen 'bout us," Hannah said more in 11 y lo Lizzie.

I Mary Ruth waited for Hannah to catch up, and then they kilkt-il Together toward the two-story bank barn in their forIhhI blue dresses and long black aprons. "Why'd you say liiii!" asked Mar^Ruth. "Do you really think Lizzie worries?" I "Well, I 'spect Mamma does, so I wouldn't be surprised if ^iini Lizzie does, too."

I "They ought to know how nice the Stoltzfus family is," Id.11 y Ruth spoke up in defense of Ezra and Elias. "Everybodyli ir1,,

I "I((/i. . . but our eldest sister's wild rumschprunge days must In fly haunt Mamma."

I "Our sister was ever so foolish," Mary Ruth said, being refill not to mention Sadie's name outright. They had been rbklden to do so by Dat and the bishop following the Bonn.

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"Foolish, jah. And downright dreadful . . . stealing Leah's beau."

Mary Ruth didn't want to worry herself over things that couldn't be changed. She was caught up in the excitement of the moment and tried hard not to gawk at the many courting buggies lined up in the side yard. Which one belongs to Elias? she wondered, a thrill of delight rushing up her spine.

Abram sat next to Ida on the front porch swing, watching the stars come out. He also noticed the lightning bugs were more plentiful than in recent summers, maybe due to frequent afternoon showers. " 'Twas right kind of Leah to settle Lydiann in for the night," he said.

Ida nodded, sighing audibly. "Jah . . . even though she's as tuckered out as I am, prob'ly. She's such a dear . . . our Leah."

"That, she is."

Ida leaned her head gently on his shoulder. At last she said, "We did the right thing treatin' her as our very own all these years."

Hearing his wife speak of their great fondness for Leah made him realize anew that his own affection for Lizzie's birth

daughter was as strong as if Ida had given birth to her. For a moment he was overcome with a rare sadness and remained silent.

Their flesh-and-blood Sadie was a different story altogether. Her defiance in not returning home after all this time had stirred up more alarm in him than he cared to voice to beloved Ida.

"The Good Lord's hand rests tenderly on us all," Ida said softly, as if somehow tuned in to his thoughts. "I daresay we'd

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Ih Htl awful pickle otherwise." J

I I If had to smile at that and reached over to cup her face

I IiIn ciillused hand. Sweet Ida . . . always thinking of the

Lit11 UikI heavenly Father as if He were her own very close

llt'lid,

I "Where do you think our twins are tonight?" He stared at

M seemingly endless cornfield to the east of the house, over

Imwi'iI Ninithy Peachey's place.

I "I Xm'tcha mean whom the girls are with?"

f Mr lot out a kindly grunt; Ida could read him like a book.

|i niifinued. "Deacon's wife told me in so many words that

|-i 'I her sons are spending quite a lot of time with Hannah

In! Mary Ruth."

| "Which boys . . . surely not the older ones?"

I "I'm thinkin' it must be Ezra and Elias." Ida snuggled

It I'u i,

I "A right fine match, if I say so myself. I best be givin' my

Iphiviil lo Deacon here 'fore long."

I Me heard the small laugh escape Ida's lips. "Best not get

I 11 ii- way, Abram. Let nature take its course."

I "I s'pose you're thinkin' I shouldn't have interfered with

It him and Leah back when."

I Ida sat up quickly and looked at him, her plump hands

in iiiio a clasp in her wide lap. "Leah would be happily mar-

pil hy now if you hadn't held out for Smithy Gid."

I "Arc ya blamin' me for what went wrong?" he said.

I Kin pushed her feet hard against the porch floor, making

U swing move too fast for his liking. When she spoke at last,

If voice trembled. "None of us truly knows what caused

Ulr breakup." , , , , , , , ,

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He inhaled and held his breath. Ida didn't know what had caused the rift between Jonas and Leah, but he knew and all too well. Abram himself had gotten things stirred up but good by raising the troublesome issue of Leah's parentage with Jonas. He had never told her that, at Peter Mast's urging, he'd put Jonas to a fiery test of truth, revealing Lizzie's carefully guarded secret. When all was said and done, Jonas had failed it miserably. "Best leave well enough alone. Jonas is married to our eldest now."

"Jah, and worse things have happened," Ida whispered, tears in her eyes. "But I miss her something awful."

Abram didn't own up to the same. "What's done is done," he said. "Thing is we've got us a son-in-law we may never lay eyes on again. Could be a grandchild by now, too."

"All because our daughter was bent on her own way. . . ."

He leaned back in the swing and said no more. At times an uncanny feeling gnawed at him, made him wonder if Ida who seemed to know more about Sadie than he did might've disregarded the bishop and read a few of their eldest's early letters,, after the law was laid down about returning them unopened.

But no, now was not the appropriate time to speculate on that. Clearly Ida needed his wholehearted companionship and understanding this night. , ,
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liinnah was surprised how warm the night was, with little i ii i breeze. Her eyes kept straying toward the moon, and

II u.ix grateful for the hush of the evening hour, especially

11 living sung so robustly. Now she sat eating ice cream in I* hunt seat of the open carriage with Ezra Stoltzfus, who

1 > ilp ii constant if not contagious smile.

She hoped Elias was not able to wrestle the reins away

i '(il K",rn tonight. It seemed both boys liked to trade off sit-

><iy in the driver's seat of the shiny new carriage. In fact, she

n fiirly sure they were actually sharing ownership of the
'lilting buggy, though she'd never heard of this done in
11 KM" families with many sons. As keenly interested as the
I icon's boys had been in Mary Ruth and herself for the past
1 (Till years, it was no wonder Ezra and Elias might share a
Itaulr buggy now that the foursome were courting age.

H Hannah's heart leaped with excitement. She was truly
Htl of auburn-haired Ezra, but more than that, she was most
B)py to see Mary Ruth putting aside her dream of becoming
jhoollvacher. At least it appeared to be so in the presence

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of her dashing young beau. If Elias was the reason for Mary Ruth to set
aside her perilous goal, then all was well and good and Hannah could
simply use the money she'd saved from selling handiwork for something
else altogether. If Mary Ruth didn't end up needing the money for future
college expenses, maybe several pretty wedding quilts would do.

Thinking about this, Hannah felt she could accept Ezra's affections if for
this one reason alone to keep the double courting going full speed ahead,
for the sake of a peaceful household and for Mary Ruth's future as a
baptized church member. The latter she knew their parents wished for
above all else.

"Let's find another courtin' couple to race," Elias said nearly the minute they
were finished eating ice cream.

"Not tonight," Ezra replied firmly.

Hannah bit her tongue. She hoped her beau got his way, being older and all.

"Aw, lookee there. It's Sam Ebersol and Adah Peachey." Elias pointed to an open buggy some distance behind them, then waved his arms, trying to get the couple's attention.

"I'm driving," Ezra said at once.

But Elias persisted. "Onion, it'll be fun. What do you say, Mary Ruth?" .-:.,

"Sure, why not?" her twin was quick to say.

Hannah grew tense. The last time Elias persuaded his brother to let him race, they'd nearly locked wheels with another courting carriage on the way to a railroad crossing down on Route 372. In the end, Hannah had let out a squeal . . . and Elias had stopped. He'd apologized promptly, saying he hadn't meant any harm by it. He had also said,

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111 heir's plenty other things to do to have fun after singing."

I'lcnty other things is right, thought Hannah. She figured at thr inic he was going, Elias wouldn't be ready to settle down Ullil I arm, probably, or marry, for another couple of years. But JthVd seen the love-light in her twin's eyes for the redheaded Mini handsome young man, and in his for pretty Mary Ruth. ;'" hut or later, the both of them would start thinking about

I' >nling church.

I Just then Sam and Adah pulled up beside them. "What's ll'iin' on?" asked Sam.

"Thought you might wanna race," Elias called to them I nun the backseat.

Sam looked at Adah, then answered, "Oh, that's all right. We've got some talking to do, Adah and I."

"Okay, then," Elias said, sitting down.

Hannah was relieved and felt herself relax against the Kent. Sam hurried his horse, passing them, and she was glad to see Ezra let Sam gain on him. Ezra, after all, was most steady and dependable. At nearly eighteen, he was taking baptismal instruction classes \$jid might be looking to settle down and marry within a year or so. Hannah wondered if she was truly mature enough, though, to accept if he should ask her to be his wife. Was she ready for the duties of home and motherhood? Mamma's sisters had married young. All except Aunt Lizzie, of course. And Mamma, who, though she'd been but seventeen when first she'd met Dat, had waited until her early twenties to tie the knot.

Behind her, she heard Elias whispering to Mary Ruth, probably with his arm draped around her shoulder; they'd done their share of snuggling, for sure. , :

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As for herself, the rest of the night would be most pleasant watching for shooting stars with Ezra, playing Twenty Questions, and letting him reach for her hand as they slowly made their way back home before dawn.

Once Leah had safely nestled Lydiann into her crib for the night, she crept toward the stairs. Having just kissed the little girl's tiny face, she realized sadly that Sadie might never know about Mamma's coming baby their new sibling-to-be.

Downstairs, she spotted the tops of her parents' heads through the front room window. She wouldn't think of disturbing them. Much of their energy, too, went into thinking of Sadie; Leah was sure it had been so since her sister's shunning.

Turning from the room, she decided it was best to leave Dat and Mamma be. They deserved some quiet time together.

She went to the kitchen and poured a glass of water, thinking now of Smithy Gid. More than likely, he could be found in his father's big barn playing with the new brood of pups. "Tonight's the night," she said to herself, "ready or not."

Slipping out the back door, she headed past the barnyard and through the cornfield. She'd kept Gid waiting long enough too long, really, as he'd made his thoughtful invitation to her two days ago. She mustn't be rude and keep him guessing by the hour. She'd had several opportunities to speak privately with him yesterday, but she had still been uncertain, though she knew Gid was as stalwart in his soul as he was in his frame. He wasn't just "as good as gold," as Dat liked to say; Gid was superior to Dat's proverbial gold, and the girl who consented to be his wife would be truly blessed.

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I Is it to be me? she wondered. Can I trust the Lord God to I guide my faltering steps?

I In vain, she tried to imagine being held in his strong arms. (Would she be gladdened by his tender affection . . . ready for (their courting days to begin? All these things and more Leah |Contemplated as her bare feet padded the ground on her way | to find the blacksmith's son before Dat and Mamma wondered (where on earth she'd taken herself off to on a night set apart I for singings. ,

| She found Smithy Gid in the haymow, amusing himself with a new pup. "Hullo," Leah called up to him.

Quickly he rose and made his way down the long ladder to her, carrying the tiny dog. "I wasn't expecting to see you tonight, Leah." He looked at her with gentle eyes. "But it's awful nice," he added with a warm smile.

They stood there looking at each other by lantern light, Leah feeling ever^o awkward. She glanced down for a moment, breathed a sigh, and then lifted

her face to his. "I'm ready to give you my answer," she said softly.

"Jah?"

"I'll go along to Strasburg with you . . . with Adah and Sam, come Saturday night."

Gid's face lit up like a forbidden electric light bulb. "Wonderful-gut! Denki for comin' here to say so."

She realized at that moment the power her decision had over him. If she'd said otherwise, she could just imagine the look of disappointment that would have transformed his

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ruddy face. "I best be headin'home," she said.

"Aw, must ya?" His eyes implored her to stay.

"Dat and Mamma don't know I'm gone. I wouldn't want them to fret." She didn't go on to say they were worried enough over Sadie. No doubt he was aware of that; it was to be expected with Gid's mother and Mamma close neighbors and bosom friends. Miriam Peachey had surely heard tell of Mamma's sleepless nights.

"Well, then, I 'spect it's best you return schnell quickly."

At that she moved toward the barn door. "Gut Nacht," she said as Gid strolled alongside her.

"Good night, Leah."

She nodded self-consciously and turned to go, walking briskly toward her father's cornfield. Hundreds of stars beckoned her, and she found herself wondering if anyone had ever tried to count them, at least those twinkling over the Ebersol Cottage.

Staring up at the sky, she pondered her decision to go with Gid this one time . . . and his near-gleeful response. Did I do the right thing?

The last place Gid wanted to be, now that Leah had told him her good news, was back up in the lonely haymow. He returned the puppy in hand to the whelping box and hurried out behind the barn, toward Blackbird Pond. He had to keep looking at the ground, now murky in the early evening hour, to see if his feet were really touching the grassy path that led through the pastureland and beyond to the lake.

With great joy, he began to count the hours till he would see Leah again, not in Abram's barn or out in the field . . . no,

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what he most anticipated was their first real date. The long ride to Strasburg was nothing to sneeze at as far as time on the road; he must make sure he took along a light lap robe, in case the evening had a chill to it. They would enjoy a fine meal in town with Adah and Sam, then leisurely return to Gobbler's Knob, a round trip of nearly ten miles. All in all, the night would not be so young when he returned Leah to the covering of her father's house.

Gid's heart sang as he picked up his pace and began to run around the wide lake. Will Leah accept my love at last?

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JLA. Schwartz plodded upstairs to the second-floor bedroom, where, in the corner of the large room, he found his wife reclining on the leather chaise, sipping a cup of chamomile tea. Lorraine's nerves must be ragged again tonight, he thought. He'd learned not to address her when she was in such a state. In the past, when he had attempted to engage her in conversation, she withdrew further still.

As for Henry, he was much more practiced at concealing his misery; he prided himself in his ability to do so. Even Lorraine had no knowledge of his ongoing despair, he was quite certain. On the exterior, his life was as fulfilled now as he had ever hoped it to be faithful wife, grown sons, and a flourishing medical clinic. With their boys gone from home, he and Lorraine had sufficient time to do as they pleased, which most evenings meant sitting in easy chairs and reading silently, enjoying baroque music, or discussing eldest son Robert's zealous letters and spiritual ambition. Lorraine was increasingly anxious, though, and he had begun to recognize the fact around the time the boys spread their proverbial wings. Continually she invited

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him to attend church with her and their neighbors, Dottie and Dun Nolt and their toddler-age son. Without exception, he refused, adding to his wife's dejection. Having attended church only sporadically during their adult years, he was by no means interested in jumping on Lorraine's recent religious bandwagon. To her credit, his wife was a woman who knew how to blend persuasion with loving consideration. This fact, over the years, I Kill helped keep their marriage intact.

His misery had not so much to do with Robert's search for (<od, nor Derek's enlistment in the army and detachment I mm the family, as his bleak memory of a dark April night when his own frail grandson had experienced both life and death in the space of a few hours. That fateful night had altered Henry's very existence.

Accordingly, each Sunday before Lorraine awakened and (he sun rose, he crept downstairs and got into the car, driving down Georgetown Road, past the Ebersol and Peachey farms, turning onto a dirt lane east of the smithy's spread of land. That narrow byway led to the ten acres he'd inherited from his father, Reverend Schwartz. Having decided against ever building a house there, Henry had held on to the grazing land, letting it appreciate in value over the years. More recently, he had thought of offering to sell it to the local blacksmith, if the Amishman was so inclined. Lorraine, however,

had suggested the parcel of land remain in the family, perhaps to be given at the appropriate time to Robert as a wedding gift.

Getting out of the car, Henry would go and tend to a small grave unmarked by a headstone, trimming the tall grass away with hand clippers. When finished, he stood in deep contemplation, the little mound of earth his altar and the clipped grass

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his pew, surrounded by a choir of insects and birds.

Just this morning he had visited the site and stared down at the memorial of his own making, recalling the momentous night he had hauled to the spot a shovel in the trunk of his car. Having paced the ground, he had made a frantic determination for the location of a proper burial. The hollowness in his soul had been undeniable as he pushed hard and deep into the ground the ball of his foot on the shovel, his arms lifting out the soil one heaping pile at a time. Grave digging was harder work than he had anticipated, both physically and otherwise, but the burial itself had been excruciating. And when the task was complete, the lifeless body of an infant boy lay in the broken earth.

There it was that Henry presented himself to the Creator God on Sunday mornings, each and every one since that very first, refusing Lorraine's invitation to a church with walls of stone and mortar. Nowhere else drew him like the open-air cathedral where he was the one and only parishioner, the lone visitor to a child's tiny grave.

Startled out of his musing by Lorraine's gentle voice, Henry jerked his head, a piece of mail slipping out of his hands and onto the floor.

"Dear," she said, "be sure to read Robert's letter."

Lorraine had left a pile of their personal mail from Saturday afternoon lying on the dresser for him. He had been much too busy at the clinic to bother

thumbing through the bills and such. He stooped now to reach for his eldest's latest letter. "How are things going for him?" he inquired for Lorraine's sake. Hard as it was for him to admit, son Robert was looking

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for absolute truth strangely finding it in a group of Biblebelieving Mennonites.

"lie's planning to come home for Thanksgiving," Lorraine ullored, still seated with cup poised in midair.

"Oh?" He nodded absentmindedly. Late November was I be perfect time for a visit with his strapping son. Perhaps Robert would consider arriving a few days early so that they might join the enthusiastic turkey shooters over on the wooded hillock across the road. We'll surprise Lorraine with a plump turkey for our Thanksgiving feast, he thought, wishing

1111 it Derek, too, might be inclined to desire connection with lumily. Regrettably there had been no word from Derek in the year, a fact that continued to grieve them. Yes, thought I liMiry. Our younger son is long gone in more ways than one.

He settled down with Robert's letter, adjusting his eyeglasses and leaning his head close to the linen stationery in order to follow every line and curve of his firstborn's penmanship.

Thursday, June hfe Dear Mom and Dad,

Thanks for writing, Dad. I received your last letter in the Wednesday mail. And thanks, Mom, for the care packages. Several of my campus friends have gratefully helped me devour your chocolate-chip cookies and banana-nut breads. Because ' of your delectable gifts, I'm one of the best-fed and most popular fellows I know!

I hope to make a trip home for Thanksgiving weekend. Any chance Deny might show up? He continues to snub my .; letters, but I'd like to see him again . . . it's been too long. ;'.

44 I'd e o e r I y JL, e im> i s . ' '."

Well, I must head to class. I'll look forward to hearing from you soon. .,,

With love to you both, Robert

Sighing, Henry blurted out, "What do you make of that, Lorraine?"

"Sounds to me Derry has no intention of keeping in touch with any of us."
Her voice wavered.

Henry felt sure he knew why; no doubt Derek was suffering a severe bout of old-fashioned guilt, and no wonder. He'd gotten an Amish girl pregnant, only to promptly leave Gobbler's Knob for the army. His son's misbehavior and indifference were an embarrassment. How could Derek ruin the girl's life and simply abandon her?

Henry folded the letter, returning it to the envelope. When it came to guilt, he could relate to having made a few serious mistakes in life some more earthshaking than others.

"We must celebrate the prospect of seeing Robert again," he said suddenly as he prepared to retire for the night. "We can't go on mourning Derek's appalling attitude."

"Sometimes that's far easier said than done," Lorraine replied, dabbing at her eyes.

He acknowledged the grim fact with a nod of his head. What else is there to do?

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Soon after Leah started working part-time at the village clinic, she began to recognize her interest in children, espe-

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Chiefly the youngest ones with obvious injuries. She loved to distract them in the waiting room by using the lot's puppets Hannah had knitted. She often did the same at home while caring for Lydiann, who, at times, seemed rather incident prone scraped knees, brush-burned elbows, and all.

Leah had surprised herself with her immediate like for the doctor and his wife; she felt sure she'd met good solid folk, not though worlds apart from her in culture and upbringing. There was not one iota of plainness about Henry and Lor-

aine, but that didn't stop Leah from enjoying their company. The doctor's infectious laughter, though seemingly forced at Linn's, and Lorraine's delicious specialty cakes and breads she'd nut for the clinic staff during short breaks in the flow of patient traffic made Leah feel most welcome.

This Monday morning she hurried into the clinic and made it off for the receptionist, as well as the coming patients. That

one, she did a bit of dusting, which, before today, had not been one of the things expected of her. Till now she had swept and washed the floors and windows, making doubly sure the examination rooms and miniscule restroom were sanitary, along with sweeping the steps and sidewalk. In many ways she was considered the clinic's sole housekeeper.

Lorraine had recently hinted she might need a bit of help, especially with the large kitchen floor and the many knickknacks that accumulated dust in both the living and sitting rooms of the Schwartz residence. So far Leah hadn't jumped at the opportunity to assist Lorraine with additional tasks, mainly because Mamma's strawberries were coming on awfully fast now and there would be plenty to sell at the Ebersols' roadside stand. In due time, at this moment, Mamma and Miriam Peachey were out

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in the hot sun picking berries while Hannah and Mary Ruth completed the washing. And Lydiann, more than likely, was babbling to Dawdi John next door in the Dawdi Haus. Only occasionally did Mamma ask her father to watch her youngest, but since Leah was expected home in time for the noon meal, Lydiann would be in Dawdi's charge only a short time. After that Leah herself would help tend to her baby sister, along with her afternoon chores outside. By taking Lydiann along with her to the barn and whatnot, she hoped to develop a strong love of the land and the farm animals in the wee toddler. And, too, it wouldn't be long and Lydiann would be someone to talk to while working outdoors someone besides Gid, that was, and Sam Ebersol's older brother, twenty-year-old Thomas, recently hired by Dat to help with fieldwork part-time.

During a lull between patient appointments, Leah got up the nerve to mention the doctor's grazing land, "not so far from the Peachey's place," interested to see what Dr. Schwartz might say about it.

When there was little or no direct response to her comment, she forged ahead. "Have you ever thought of putting cattle out there? Such nice grazing it would be."

The good doctor scratched his head and looked nearly disoriented for a few seconds. Then he said, "I've thought of different things over the years. Everything from building a house and barn on it ... to putting up a stable for horseback riding. In the end, I always come back to its being too great an effort to bother with putting cattle or anything else on it, though."

She paused to study him. Tall and lean, he was a man with plenty of options flitting in his head. But he fell silent, and in

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|;i short time another patient came up the walk and in the I door.

1 Leah was surprised to see her mother's cousin Fannie iMast, with young Jake and Mandie in tow. She at first felt Isheepish standing there, then pained, remembering Fannie [was to have been her mother-in-law. Without

meaning to, she (found herself gawking at the twins; she hadn't seen them in two years and they'd grown so much.

This woman, equally as plump as Mamma now, if not

I more so, had always been a bubbly hostess when the Ebersols

I visited the Mast orchard house on Grasshopper Level, not but

la thirty-minute buggy's ride from Gobbler's Knob. Today,

though, when Fannie caught Leah's eye, her mouth drooped

and she turned away, taking the twins' hands and guiding

them to the far corner of the waiting room.

Undaunted, Leah slipped into the short hall, hoping to watch her little cousins toddle with their mamma to one of the examination rooms. She stood behind the doorjamb and peered out as the threesome made their way.

Jake was tall an^ skinny, much like his big brother Jonas, though his hair was a deep brown and he limped slightly as he tottered along. Leah couldn't tell if he'd hurt himself or if he was still discovering his own stride as a two-year-old. She recalled the first time she'd held him, how she had sensed his helplessness as an infant a frail one at that.

But it appeared his mother's nurturing touch had made all the difference, just as it had for the sickly lambs and struggling houseplants Fannie was known to nurse back to health.

Dr. Schwartz appeared in the hallway and called Jake's name, then scooped him up in his arms. He touched the top

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of Mandie's head, speaking quietly to Fannie.

Observing Mandie now, Leah was taken with her dainty features, though altogether different from Jake's her blue eyes and blond hair showing hints of highlights the color of honey, much lighter than Jonas's.

Attempting to redirect her thoughts from her former beau, she wondered how Fannie must feel seeing her here after all this time, knowing surely she did how devoted her firstborn son had been to Leah from his earliest teen years. Until he'd turned his attention to Sadie, of course. Did Fannie have any knowledge of Jonas and Sadie, perhaps where they were living in Ohio? Would she even care to say if Leah got up the nerve to ask?

Having been in attendance at the required membership meeting where Bishop Bontrager called for a vote for or against shunning Jonas most excruciating for her she understood fully that he had been cut off from his family as entirely as the rest of the People. Unless he returned and repented for breaking the strict covenant, Jonas would be estranged from both the communities of Gobbler's Knob and Grasshopper Level all the days of his life. Leah felt strongly that the bishop had found fault with him because of his keen interest in carpentry. For Jonas to abandon the idea of farming was near heresy!

Sighing now, she was tormented with the image of the smiling Mast children, as well as the solemn face of Fannie, Mamma's once bright and happy relative. Why is she sour toward me? she wondered. Does she blame me for the shun on her son?

It was Lizzie, not Ida, who spent a good part of the morning picking strawberries with Miriam Peachey when she came

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In lend a hand. Ida remained indoors, trying to keep herself > > H i|, ;md all for the best since she had complained of nausea ii uliyy. Lizzie was more than a little concerned about her sister.

She was glad for the white-pleated candlesnuffer-style Minlionnet Hannah had presented to her just this morning ullcr the twins had hung out the clothes to dry.

"It'll keep the sun off your face," Hannah had said sweetly, entering the kitchen wearing a green choring dress.

"So your nose won't peel something awful . . . like last miiiimer's sunburn," Mary Ruth had added, glancing approvingly at her twin.

Since Ida had already taken herself upstairs, Lizzie felt she nii^ht to see who was doing what chores, both indoors and out. Mary Ruth spoke up, declaring she would be the one to look after Lydiann while the clothes dried, and then she'd single-handedly fold everything neatly after the noon meal, once Lydiann was down for a nap. Hannah, on the other h;md, volunteered to hoe the large family vegetable garden iillcr the dishes were washed and dried.

With Leah gorje for the morning at the clinic, it seemed i hey might've been a bit shorthanded with Ida resting, but I hanks to Miriam, the morning duties would be accomplished inn timely manner.

"Awful kind of you to come over," Lizzie said as she and Miriam moved through the strawberry patch. "Did you suspect Ida might be suffering another bout of mornin' sickness?"

Miriam nodded. "Jah, and she has no business bein' out here in the hot sun."

"Aside from that, I'd have to say she's feeling perty well. She's a strong one, Ida."

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They worked together without saying much more for a time. Then Miriam asked softly, looking over her shoulder, "Ida bears most of her pain in silence . . . what with her eldest gone, ain't so?"

"Oh my, ever so much. The girl's shunning has taken its toll. None of us understands why she refused to repent here in Gobbler's Knob. The silence and separation is almost a punishment for all of us, too."

Miriam stretched a moment, then resumed picking. "On top of that, Ida tells me she gets ever so blue not hearin' a speck from Fannie." She shook her head sadly. "Why she keeps on writing letters, I just can't figure. If it were me, I'd plain quit."

Lizzie knew well why her sister continued to send letters over to Grasshopper Level. "Bless her heart, she hopes Fannie might write back with some word of our wayward girl . . . though the Masts must be in the dark as much as we are."

"How awful sad for Abram and Ida, having no contact with either their eldest or their only son-in-law," Miriam replied. "And the Masts have kept mighty tight-lipped. Surely something will give sooner or later."

"I can only imagine what it might take to get the two families talking again." Lizzie's pail was nearly full now, and a glance at Miriam's let her know now was as good a time as any for them to hurry inside and cool off a bit with a nice tall glass of iced tea. . ., . . . , . . . , . . . , :

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I Tiinnah stole away to the bedroom during the hottest hour of the day and took from the bureau drawer her makeshift willing journal, a simple notebook with yellow lined paper. She wanted to catch up on her diary

before it was time to in\ss around for a double date with Ezra, and Mary Ruth and Kilns.

Saturday afternoon, June 25 :'. , ,

Dear Diary,

I haven't put my thoughts down on paper every other day like I'd set out to. Now, more than ever, I ought to be recording the events as they happen to my dear twin and me. If Ezra Stoltzfus and his younger brother Elias are to become my and Mary Ruth's husbands someday, it would be an awful shame not to have faithfully written about our double courtship. Goodness knows, my children and grandchildren might one day wish I had.

So ... I am making an attempt to be more thorough, beginning with what happened today. Mary Ruth confided she has been seriously considering extending her rumschprunge for

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several more years. This is such a disappointment; I'd hoped she would join church with me. We've done everything else together. Why not this?

Life is ever so unpredictable makes me wonder if Elias, too, is thinking along the same lines. Obviously he isn't headed toward making his kneeling vow before the membership this fall, since he's not taking baptism classes with Ezra.

Naturally I pleaded with Mary Ruth not to tell another

soul, "not till you think gut and hard." Such news would hurt

Mamma and Dat even worse than they already are. And

> Leah . . . oh my, I hate to think what it would do to her if

Mary Ruth stalled too long and ended up going her own way.

Leah has had more than her share of heartache. '

,... Come tonight, I'm hoping Elias and Mary Ruth sit in the .
front seat of the courting buggy. They might not be so inclined
to smooch that way . . . though it's more awkward for Ezra
and me, sitting behind them and having to see what's going on.

When all's said and done, liking a boy so much that you
turn your back on the Lord God and the People isn't worth a
hill of beans all summer. Knowing Mary Ruth, I expect she'll
come round sooner or later. '!'...' , : ; Respectfully,

.....'.. ; Hannah

: She closed the notebook and placed it back in the drawer, concealing it
with several woolen scarves. Then she went to fill the washbasin with water
to freshen up for supper and her evening with Ezra, who had suggested
going to Strasburg for some store-bought ice cream. The thought of seeing
him again made her feel light inside, and a peace settled over her.

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I Uenh was content with the quietude of the house. Lydiann Iwhn liupping
while Mamma read the Good Book in the big St'ilrooni. Aunt Lizzie
worked downstairs in the kitchen, niking as silently as she could, and Mary
Ruth and Hannah w down the hall in their room, most likely preparing to go
plilillg in someone's courting buggy.

I Standing at the window, Leah looked down, appreciating |iIn bright green of the enormous trees and the meadow.

II '.i-.lics of color from the wild flowers scattered here and there

I

I iiij;ht her eye, and she wondered, What's Gid thinking? Is he I - 'iiiifing the minutes till we sit side by side in his open buggy?I Slowly she turned from her window, wandered to the corIIii i of the room, and sat in the single cane chair, leaning her L|Ihiws hard on her legs, palms cupping her chin. With a great pigh, she began to remove her head covering and the pins in fcvr bun. She shook out her hair, untangling it with her fingers lid going over and over the length.

I As she began to brush her hair vigorously, she recalled the hiuny times she had brushed or combed Sadie's beautiful him id locks. Often the two of them had taken turns doing so

in day's end.

I When she was satisfied all the snarls were out, she rose Inn I walked to the bed the one she and Sadie had shared

I1 on i the time they were but tiny girls, once Leah was able to fclrcp in a bed and not roll out.

I Do you miss me, sister, as sorrowfully as I miss you?I She felt the strength drain from her legs, and she was in impelled to lie down. A short rest might rejuvenate her for the long night ahead. Almost immediately her muscles pelnxcd as she stretched out on the bed. Sadie's plump pillow

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was a constant reminder of their many late-night talks, sharing dreams of the future as schoolgirls and on into the early teen years .. . and finally rumschpringe. They had always talked of living neighbors to each other as

married women. "Our babies will grow up together just like brothers and sisters," Sadie had promised in the fading light.

Leah couldn't bear to think of the children Sadie would

give birth to. Such things were too painful still. Reaching over, she slid her hand beneath her sister's pillow, aware of its utter coolness to the touch. Will I ever see you again? she wondered. The thought left her torn, and tears came all too fast . . . missing Sadie yet not wanting to truly know about her life as Jonas's wife. No, 'tis best you stay wherever you

are.,

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When it came time to go out and hitch his horse to the courting buggy, Gid simply told his mother he had "some business in town." It was a common phrase used among the young men in the community on a Saturday night before the no-church Sunday. This, to explain the reason for having cleaned up, put unruly hair to order with a comb, and dressed around in clean black trousers and colorful shirts, though Plain parents all over Lancaster County were mindful it was courting night.

"Oh?" his mamma said, her face shining with her delight. "Well, have yourself a good time, hear?"

Pop nodded slowly, smiling faintly before recovering his solemn look. Gid was downright certain his father had at least

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l|n inkling Leah would also be going along "to tend to busilnens."

I "We won't be waitin' up for you, son," Mamma said, a Itwlnkle in her eyes.

I Pop agreed they'd be "goin' to bed with the chickens," so |Oid felt assured of their trust, just as all young Amishmen did Ion such a night. Though he knew they would not interfere With his choice of a girlfriend, he would attempt to guard his ifeliil ionship with Leah, whatever it was to be, from the eyes lind ears of the People as a whole for as long as possible. In Ifutt, he must remind Adah once again to keep quiet about ll.t'ah going along with them tonight, just as he wouldn't think Inl breathing a word that Leah's cousin Sam was seriously |(onrting Adah and, more than likely, soon to marry her. The liK^old custom of secrecy was so ingrained into the ritual of Ipourtship, Gid felt sure no one would guess whom he was lengaged to when the time finally did come. No, he must woo hnd win Leah's heart and require his sister to vow absolute jlecrecy. ' ,'

I Nothing must gonvrong, he thought. I must dg things the

I -* : ': ' ' :i' ; ; ' '

Respectable and right way. Beginning tonight. ;

Locusts sang a percussive song as Smithy Gid's best horse pulled the open buggy west from Gobbler's Knob, past the dense woods on the north, heading toward the town of Strashtirg. Gid's sister pointed out how pretty the sky was, and Sam Ebersol said he wouldn't be surprised if there was a downright beautiful sunset tonight. ';

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To Gid's left, Leah sat straight and stiff in the seat, as if she wasn't wholly committed to being there. Or, more than likely, she was uneasy with double courting, what with Adah and Sam nearly engaged already. How awkward for her for them, really. Yet I'm determined for her to have a right nice time, thought Gid, holding the reins. Leah must feel comfortable notonly with me, but with my sister and her beau.

Surely the sweet fragrance of honeysuckle, the shimmer of the first evening star shortly after sunset, and the fact Leah's best girlfriend was along for the

ride would enhance her first outing in his black courting buggy. Gid dared not to go so far as to think his mere presence might make the evening altogether pleasant for her.

Behind them in the second seat, Sam began to tell a joke to Adah. Both Adah and Sam laughed out loud when the tall story was over. Gid felt like letting loose with hearty laughter himself, but Leah was only smiling, not laughing at all, so he remained silent. He was, in general, much too self-conscious. He wanted to be himself, to relax and enjoy the ride, the night air so warm and agreeable for such a trip. Frankly he felt nearly helpless to wind down, and it was obvious Leah felt the same.

He was indeed thankful for Sam's wholehearted chortle, which continued for several more jokes, at least until well past Rohrer Mill Road. Soon the horse turned north at Paradise Lane, taking them closer to the Strasburg Pike and then west, past the railroad depot and into the town of Strasburg.

"Did ya hear of the boy who attended his first singing, hooked up with a wild bunch, drank himself full of moon-

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hine, and passed out on the front seat of his own carriage?"

lam asked.

"Ach, what happened?" Adah asked innocently. , "From what I heard and this is true his horse simply

rut red on home, the drunk youth sleepin' all the while in the

Km-"

Gid had heard such stories, too, and he said so but added quickly that there were "some fatal accidents happening Jflder those kinds of circumstances, too." He didn't especially Vnnt to be a wet blanket, but, truth was, several young men Hid been killed that way when their horses galloped right ,h

rough a red light at a dangerous intersection, the carriage file broadside by an unsuspecting automobile.

His comment stirred up some talk from Leah, and a few minutes later Sam jumped in with more jokes. With an upward sigh, Gid realized the evening was going to turn out just fine. He felt the tension drain from his jaw, and when he could do so discreetly, he saw that Leah, too, seemed much more tranquil now, her hands not so tightly clasped in her lap.

It was on the ride home from Strasburg, as they made the (end onto Georgetown Road, that Gid spotted two open bug'ies riding side by side at a fast pace. "Look at that!" he said.

Both Leah and Adah gasped.

"Pity's sake, what're they doin'?" Adah hollered. ;

Leah held on to the seat with both hands. "Somebody's a Summkopp!"

"Worse than a blockhead," Gid added.

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'i'llMiM58 : ' ' . " fO e d e r L y J-, e u? I s .".

"I should say!" Adah said.

"Let's not get too close, in case. .. ." Leah's voice trailed off.

"Don'tcha worry none," Gid reassured her, wanting to touch her hand but refusing to take advantage of the harrowing situation. Instead, he steered the horse onto the right shoulder and slowed down, allowing some distance between his buggy and the two speeding carriages ahead.

Suddenly he heard a girl's voice from one of the buggies. "Elias, stop!"

"Ach no," Leah whispered.

"What?" Gid leaned near. "Do you recognize someone?"

"My sister .. . Hannah." She turned in her seat now that they had rolled to a halt. "She may be dating one of the deacon's sons."

"Then he oughta know better!" Adah was standing up behind them now for a better look.

The deafening sound of a car horn pierced the stillness. Quick as a wink, one of the buggies fell behind the other, and Gid breathed a sigh of relief. "Too close for comfort."

"You can say that again." Leah put her hands on her throat.

Gid waited a few more minutes, then clicked his cheek and his horse pulled forward. "We could follow the buggy your sister's in," he suggested. ,,

"Gut idea," Adah said. .] ',.... \

"Jah, let's follow'em!" Sam said.

Leah said no more, and Gid wondered if she was worried the Stoltzfus boy might feel threatened somehow, that trailing them might cause a rift between herself and her younger sis-

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lits. He certainly understood if she was thinking that way. I i-ah might've told him, if the two of them had gone riding ;ilone, that Abram's other daughters she and Sadie, at least had surely endured enough strain between them to last ;i lifetime.

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Xiannah said not a word to Mary Ruth as they slipped into the house through the kitchen door. She was so upset with Elias and Mary Ruth for egging him on all she wanted to do was hurry and undress for bed. At least in my dreams I won't be ridin with the likes of Elias Stoltzfus! she thought, heading for the stairs.

Once the two of them were situated in bed, scarcely needing even a sheet, with the room so stuffy and warm, she was careful to sigh ever so lightly, hoping Mary Ruth wouldn't mention anything. She felt done in from having clung to her seat for dear life, and literally, too! Goodness, she was fairly sure the driver of the car coming straight at them tonight scarcely had enough time to sound the horn, let alone pray that the wild buggy driver could get out of his way.

"I know what you're thinkin'," Mary Ruth whispered on the pillow next to her.

Hannah inhaled and held her breath for a moment, then let it out gradually. "Honestly, I felt I saw my whole life flash in front of my eyes tonight." , ;

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I "I don't think we were ever in any real danger, Hannah.

I fur pity's sake!"

I "t, >li, but we were1. Didn't you see how close that car came

l|ii Inning us?"

I Mury Ruth was quiet, stirring only enough to turn her

Ihnk I" Hannah.

I "Weren't you frightened, Mary Ruth?"

I "I did feel the hairs on my neck stand straight up, but that
Ivviin only from excitement, nothin' more. Frankly it was lots
It'll Inn." Mary Ruth pulled on the sheet, leaving little for her
[twin, "Resides, Elias is a right gut driver, really he is."

I I limnah thought her sister was sadly mistaken. "Well, if
[thill's what you call fun, then maybe we'd best not go double
Icoiirring anymore."

I "If that's what you want" came the empty reply.

I .She has no sense of good judgment, Hannah thought. Maybe
IMiiry Ruth preferred to court alone, after all. If so, Hannah
Hidn'i quite know how she felt about that, though it would
[give her and Ezra more time to get to know each other. That
Knight be a good thy^g; however, she wasn't so sure it would
Ifcu1 wise to encourage Mary Ruth and Elias to court alone. She
IhnU'd to think of her twin ending up the way Sadie had . . .
llnd like Aunt Lizzie evidently, too, according to Mamma's
Hi vount of things most private. : : !, ,

I Leah was becoming more and more eager to get home, Ihii'k to the
comfort of her soft bed. The carriage seat felt hwhil hard now, and Gid
seemed too eager to keep driving jlnnind in circles. Adah and Sam were
silent in the second lliciil behind them, and she wondered if Adah had dozed
off

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on Sam's shoulder. Surely they weren't smooching, knowing Adah.

Looking to her left, away from Gid, Leah recalled her firstever kiss. Jonas had shown no hesitancy whatsoever, and as much as she had delighted in the feel of his lips on hers that afternoon in the meadow, she'd also heard clearly Mamma's admonition: Save lip-kissin' for your husband. . . .

Well, obviously she and Jonas had been only betrothed, not married, so according to Mamma, she had no business yielding to his embrace. And every day that passed, she pushed away the warm thoughts of her former beau, wishing to high heavens she'd waited to let her husband be the first to kiss her, whoever that was to be.

She had been meaning to ask Aunt Lizzie about all this, or Mamma. If they knew, would they say her disobedience had caused her to lose Jonas in the end? Might Mamma admit such a thing? Was the lip-kissing rule passed down from all the People's mothers to their daughters as keenly important as that? She knew of a good many young married couples that never kissed till their wedding day; some stricter groups even forbid holding hands before marriage.

Wishing the road was better lit than by an occasional yard light whenever they passed the English farmhouses, Leah wondered what time it was and how much longer she'd have to wait to return home.

Out of the blue, Smithy Gid got a talk on, and as tired as she was, she thought it best to lend her ear . . . show respect. "What would you think of going to Strasburg again sometime?" he said. ,/;; ',."...

She wasn't sure if he, meant to ask if she enjoyed the visit

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to I lie neighboring village or if he was asking her for another (Idfc. So, not to confuse him, she mentioned the nice supper .^they'll had, how awful kind it was of him to include her.

"Pidja like the food?" he asked.

"Right tasty, it was. Denki."

" "I was my first time eating there. Sam has been tellin' me nil ;iiul on for several weeks that we oughta go."

"Ho Sam knew of it, then?"

He nodded cheerfully. "That's how I heard of the place."

She was feeling sorry for Gid, truly; he was trying to draw liri (nit of her shell, wanting to make good conversation. "I lll'.i'd it just fine," she said, putting on a smile. "As gut as Imme cooking, really."

She saw him glance down to see where her hands were |iiti* then, and she was glad she'd folded them on her lap. No iciiNe making things more complicated than they already wi'i'o, him wanting more than mere friendship and her con-

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j i' m| with things as they were. For now.

"How would you feel 'bout going to the next singing?" he

iM.Kfd.

"I haven't been for the longest time. Might seem pecuI...I."

"Maybe you and Adah could ride together, and then . . . I'd be happy to bring you home."

She didn't know what made her say it, but without think-

lii) Ji twice, she simply said, "Sure, Gid. That'd be fine." She
r Itoped they might not end up with Adah and Sam again,
llnnigh. It was awful complicated riding around the country-
I HitU* with them when all they talked about was renting or
tmllding a house, what they needed in the way of furnishings,

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and whatnot typical talk for a serious couple. Surely Gid must either know
or strongly suspect this about his sister and Sam.

She looked off toward the horizon line to the west, her thoughts straying
hard to Ohio . . . wondering if Sadie and Jonas were still living there. Were
they happy as larks? Was it even possible for Sadie to find joy with Leah's
first and only love? Quickly she felt ashamed, because it was wrong to
begrudge her sister and Jonas anything.

"Sometimes you seem almost lost without your older sister," Gid said
unexpectedly.

"Is it that noticeable?"

They rode along in silence for a ways. He surprised her when he slipped his
arm around her shoulder, barely touching her as he did. "It pains me so ...
you must know this, Leah."

Then and there, she felt the oddest twinge. She turned and looked at him
really looked. Such compassion in his face, his eyes much too serious now.
Usually he was easy to talk to, but this minute she felt awkward, unable to
speak. She wanted to please him, to let him know how grateful she was for
his caring about her, yet what should she say? What could she say?

Slowly he drew her near, letting go the reins and reaching for her ever so gently. "Oh, Leah. I'm awful sorry for what you've been through. ..."

She couldn't help herself as she began to cry, at once glad Adah and Sam were asleep sitting up in each other's arms. "You're so nice to me, Gid. You've always been so."

He held her fast, and she was surprised at how good it felt "to. rest in the strength of his arms. Like he was truly a dear

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.I I nisi ihI friend, not an anxious young man wanting to get '. with rimrting, hoping she might fall in love with him so In muld marry before his younger sisters. No, there was a genuine consideration in his warm embrace, and she laid her litutd HjUfninst his burly shoulder.

Two long, sad years had come and gone, and she'd

U'lillVCil nearly like a widow, never attending singings or corn

1 I'ln^s where young men and women paired up, so dis-

<il(hl she was. She had made up her mind all she wanted

I In1 love of the Lord God and whatever He had in store

I ir r life. She'd even turned her back on the idea of marry-

I hinking that if Aunt Lizzie could be happy as a maidel,

! ii why couldn't she?

Mm now, with these familiar feelings stirring within, what Jtlu; to do? Yet, when all was said and done, Leah was free ' Invt* again. If I choose to, she thought, surprising herself.

Sitting this close to Gid, she felt genuinely cared for,
I'iked after . . . even cherished. She was wary of the feeling
In 'd missed it so desperately after she and Jonas split up. Now
In- was afraid it might overcome her, because as they rode
if n% she suddenly knew she wanted more, wanted to drown
In i resentment toward Sadie in Gid's loving arms.

When they neared the turnoff to the Peachey farm, he I . I . ^1, "Do you
mind if I walk you home? We could cut

1111' m i>;h the field, if that's all right with you."

I She said she didn't mind, and right then she realized how

I1 I n| hIk1 was. This happy night had completely changed her ! in look.
Gone was her impatience to get home. Something

I1 nder that had died in her was beginning to revive, and at

I11 in moment, she felt she might at last be able to cast aside

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the stranglehold of sadness and animosity hindering her path. Just look at
the smithy and Miriam Peachey . . . how happy they are, she told herself. If
Gid's father was as loving to his mother as Leah had always observed him
to be, then Gid would also be a compassionate husband, wouldn't he? How
foolish of her to pass up the chance to be loved so dearly, to be so
completely adored.

She found herself thinking ahead to what it might be like to accept Gid's
hand, to live with him and cherish him, to care for their little ones ... to be

his devoted helpmeet. As thoughtful and kind as he was, how hard would it be to follow her heart if truly her heart was coming round, as it seemed to be?

Lest Leah was getting ahead of herself, she chased such thoughts away, but she was altogether pleased she and Gid had yet another few minutes to spend together this night.

They were enveloped in the green scent of jagged grass and the dank smell of cow pies as they strolled through the wide field between the Ebersol and Peachey farms.

The roof of her father's barn caught Leah's eye, the brilliant reflection of the moon dousing the silvery tin with its whiteness. She heard what she thought was one of their mules braying. Mules weren't nearly as stubborn as some folks seemed to think. They could be coaxed, not easily, but persuaded nevertheless to work the narrowest sections of the field. And mules required less feed and had greater fortitude than horses. . . .

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H Old glanced over at the barn. "What's the racket over

Hrs?"

H "Must be a bat tormenting the livestock." She looked up HDkl. "Ever see one lunge at a mule?" H To this they both laughed, and she welcomed his hand Hdng hers. His companionably firm clasp made her own Hftcl sivm small and almost fragile, and once again she was Hftkl lit the long-dormant stirring within. She moved along Hhln side, keeping pace with his stride. H "Speaking of mules," Gid said halfway across the field, ^wlju ever hear of certain long-ago ministers sayin' it was ^tnisive to mix God's creatures because our heavenly Father Hin'l create such an animal in the first place? Like breeding Hiorse and a donkey to produce a mule." H "jiih, Dat's said as much . . . but we all have mules these Hjm, ain't? So what do you make of that?" H: "Sure beats trying to get the field horses to go into steep ^Ct'S or some of the more narrow spots in the field," GidHi led.

They talked slowly as they walked, both seemingly hesitant to call it a night now that they were getting on so well. When they were alone with only the moon, the stars, and the blackness of the sky.

Her impression of the last full hour with Gid had grown a little garden in her heart. Never in the most secret land of her soul could she have foreseen the joy she felt as she walked with Gid Peachey, picking her way through the Hick grazing land, her hand snugly in his. "What would you say if I told you this is the happiest of my life?" he came right out and said. ":", ;.

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He didn't expect her to say, ":", ;.

A lump crept into her throat, and she was afraid she might cry again. She dared not try to answer.

He must have understood and squeezed her hand, turning to face her. His wavy light brown hair seemed almost colorless in the glow of the moon. "I hope it's not too forward of me. . . ."

She wondered what he might say and, composing herself, she asked, "What is it, Gid?"

He paused but for a moment. "I'd like to court you, if you . . . well, if you might agree."

She didn't once glance sheepishly at the Ebersol Cottage as she often did when talking with Gid here lately. No, she kept her gaze on him, studying the rugged lines of his face, the unabashed attraction he displayed for her as he leaned slightly forward.

She knew she'd traversed the gamut of feelings, from reluctance at the outset of the evening to this strange yet wonderful sincerity, the way she felt at this moment surely it wasn't the moonlight and gentle sweet breeze of the wee hours, was it?

Smithy Gid's invitation was hard to resist. "Jah, I'll go for steady with you," she replied.

Then and there, he picked her up and swung her around and around. Her joy knew no bounds, because she had been so sure in that most secret room of her heart she would never, ever feel this way again. Yet here she was . . . and she did.⁶⁹vn->

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June's fair weather swept into the soaring temperatures of midsummer, and Mamma's lilies flourished, amassed in a solid icil of eye-catching pink.

On her way to the outhouse, Mary Ruth happened to lirush past them, deep in thought, not paying any mind that her for-good purple dress had gotten some of the golden red pollen smeared on it. When she did notice it, she tried to Inuish it off with her hand, setting the stain but good. Realizing what she'd do*ie, she hurried back to the house and told Mamma.

"Ach, you must always use adhesive tape to get lily pollen nil," Mamma said.

"That or wipe it off with an old rag . . . anything but your hands," Aunt Lizzie said, explaining the natural oils from the kin set the stain.

Mamma continued. "If the stain stays put after using the i.ig, let the sun bleach it out."

Mary Ruth sighed and looked down at the smudged mess. "Well, now I have nothing to wear to the singing. My other

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good dress is too snug through the middle."

Aunt Lizzie shook her head. "Then you may just have to stay home and sew a new one tomorrow."

"What?" Mary Ruth didn't catch on to Aunt Lizzie's kidding at first.

Lizzie's face broke into a smile. "Come, let me see what I can do."

Mamma left the kitchen to tend to Lydiann, who was wailing upstairs, and while Aunt Lizzie scrubbed with an old rag, Mary Ruth bemoaned the fact that Hannah was refusing to double court with her. "My twin's not herself," she confided.

Lizzie seemed to perk up her ears. "Why would that be?"

Mary Ruth wouldn't go so far as to say more than "Hannah's persnickety these days . . . been so all summer, really."

"Well, in some cases, that's not such a bad thing," Lizzie said, still scrubbing. "All depends on what a person's bein' particular about, ain't so?"

Good point, thought Mary Ruth. "Still. . . ever since Hannah started taking baptismal classes, she seems aloof."

"For gut reason, I 'spect." Aunt Lizzie stepped back to look over the pollen stain and Mary Ruth herself.

"Why do you think that?"

: "I daresay if you consider it carefully, you prob'ly already know."

She knew, all right. She just hated to admit it to anyone, especially Aunt Lizzie. For the longest time it seemed Hannah had been too quiet, almost downhearted. Was it the absence of Sadie . . . the unending silence from Ohio? Or was Hannah peeved at her for not following the Lord in holy baptism as

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iMIiiiiili herself hoped to do come fall? No one but her twin mew ilnit Mary Ruth had refused, of course. It wasn't someRlni4 you went around telling, not amongst the People. The lomrn folk would frown and carry on something awful if they Ifli'w I he Ebersol twins close in looks and

upbringing nielli he heading in different directions, one certainly not in fit*
I 'Id Ways of their forefathers.

Aimr Lizzie was still scrubbing the spot awful hard, and liiiy Ruth
wondered if she might be attending the singing *llh ;i hole in her best dress
or, just as bad, a smeared stain.

"I lave you asked Hannah to loan you one of her dresses?" \w\\\ Lizzie's
question cut through the stillness.

She hadn't thought of that. "I best not be askin' her for nyihing."

Lizzie's hands rested hard on her slender hips. "Pity's sake, lie I wo of you
have shared nearly everything since you were loi h just little ones." She
frowned and cocked her head, lookriM nwful curious.

I "If you promise not to tell, I'll say why," she whispered lick.

I Rut Aunt Lizzie surprised her startled her, really by licking away and
waving her hands in front of her. "No . . . 'in not interested in hearin' or
keepin' any more secrets. I've turned a mighty hard lesson."

A Lint Lizzie's response made Mary Ruth feel even more lime and made
her want to tell her aunt all the more. But it IMS no use to plead. Truth was,
contrary to what Hannah night say or think, Mary Ruth hadn't fully decided
whether)l not to join the Amish church. What was the rush, anyway?
liinnah could make her covenant this September if she

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chose, without Mary Ruth tagging along just because they were twins and
all. Then, when Mary Ruth was good and ready, she'd decide, and not one
moment before. Meanwhile, she wanted to take her time with
rumschpringe, just as Dat had said to do back last year. Joining church, after
all, was for a lifetime, so it could wait... for now. She had too much fun
ahead of her to get bogged down with required membership meetings where
the People sat and voted on weighty issues like shunning wayward and
sinful folk. No, she didn't think she was ready for that kind of responsibility.

And, if the full truth were known, she sometimes resented the People for ousting Sadie the way they had when all the girl had gone and done was fall in love with the wrong boy. Sure, Sadie had known better, but putting her under the Bann for life was so awful harsh, wasn't it? Unforgiving too. Mary Ruth wasn't certain she could set herself up as a holy example amongst the People . . . not the powerful way she longed for Elias's hugs and kisses, though Mamma would have a fit if she knew. With Hannah and Ezra courting on their own, the temptation would be stronger for her when with Elias, especially when the moon was as bright and beautiful as it would be tonight.

"If you won't ask Hannah for a clean dress, what 'bout Leah?" Aunt Lizzie suggested.

"Gut idea . . . just might solve the predicament," Mary Ruth said and reached for her aunt, gave her a grateful hug, and hurried out the back door in search of Leah.

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Llizzie could see Ida needed to give extra attention to

i I llflnii, who was awful fussy following supper, so Lizzie stayed

11 I'lenn up the dishes, then dropped off Hannah, Mary Ruth,

Itiu! Leah at the barn singing over at Abram's brother Jesse

flu^'Hol's place. It was right nice to see Leah participating in

llii1 ficliviies with the young folk again; Lizzie's heart was

{inly yliul.

Wlu'ii she returned from the trip, she took her time unhitching the horse and carriage, in no hurry to head toward lln house. The evening was pleasant, and what with having I il cu the girls to the singing, she was feeling a slight bit sorry (i herself. Not like her, really. She knew she ought not to filli-w her thoughts to stray back to her own courting years, I nit A brain had told her

rather falteringly on several occasions. Leah had been asking questions of him, wanting to know if not her father namely who he was. If Lizzie had her druthers, she'd just as soon never say.

Straightening now, she looked toward the woods and her father's house, put there by Abram and his brothers back when father was in such a bad way, expecting Leah and scarcely but a girl herself . . . not knowing anything about her baby's father. At least, not back then. And now didn't it beat all for Leah? In so interested in knowing?

Just what was she to tell Leah? She certainly couldn't

tell herself to make known the whole story how she'd run

in something terrible as a teenager, thumbing a car ride

with a complete stranger, an Englishman at that. Oh, the idea

of revealing such a thing to precious Leah made her feel

ill with embarrassment. She almost wished to roll back

the calendar, thinking it might've been better to leave things

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as they had been, with Leah thinking Ida was her one and only mamma.

If I could relive the worst of my youth, what would I do differently? she

wondered, shuddering at the sudden thought. If she had not had her hair cut or her face made up on New Year's Eve back when and drunk far too much moonshine dear

sweet Leah would never have been conceived. Truly, the Lord God had wrought a miracle of life and joy out of her great sin.

Feeling glum, she found herself heading toward the Ebersol Cottage, hoping she might offer to help Ida with something, anything at all, as an excuse to stay. At the moment she could not face her own empty house.

She discovered Ida giving Lydiann a bath in the middle of the kitchen in the big galvanized tub. "Here, let me do that for you." She knelt down to splash her little niece while Ida rose and went to sit across the room in Abram's hickory rocker.

"I'm all in," Ida admitted, fanning her face with her apron.

"You just rest there, sister." And to Lydiann, she said, "Now, ain't that right? We'll let your mamma be for a bit while you get all soaped up and clean." She couldn't help it; the baby talk came flying fast out of her mouth as she enjoyed bathing the adorable toddler.

Soon Abram clumped indoors to wash his hands. He made over Lydiann, still sitting in four inches or so of water that had been warmed by the kettle on the wood stove. Lydiann tapped a wooden spoon on the water's surface, making more and more bubbles.

"Well, now, Ida, looks like we've got ourselves a tidy

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pUftHNter," said Abram, standing near the tub and watching.

I "Soon it'll be Ida's turn in the bath, jah?" Lizzie said,

Ulli'ing ;i1 Ida, who was grinning at her wee daughter, lath-

nd up I mm head to toe.

I "I should say so," Ida replied. "Goodness knows, I must

lilt II like a pig, what with the awful heat this week."

I I izzie offered to tuck Lydiann in for the night, but the girl

It'll up a storm when she went to pick her up. "Aw, you

Mtilin I'liiy longer?" She set her back down.

I Aluam chuckled. "You're spoiling the child; that's plain to

I, "

I "She's only two once, ain't?" Ida said, beaming with love

km the rocking chair.

I I loing to sit on the bench, Abram leaned back against the

He, His elbows spread behind him. "You's oughta guess who

Hit into this morning," he said.

"Who?" Lizzie said.

"Peter Mast." On any given day, Abram would have Miiilod all discussion about the Masts, quickly looking at the Ihhi if they were* mentioned in conversation, as if merely inn injj; the name caused him distress.

"Hid he speak to ya?" Ida asked, leaning forward. I "Not a word." Abram shook his head. "'Tis the oddest In ill!, really." I "Jah" was all Ida said.

I I izzie had an idea maybe not such a bright one, but she pHred it anyway. "Has anyone thought of taking some fruit IN over to Fannie Mast?" I Ida clasped her hands and brought them up as if praying.

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"I've considered doing so any number of times as a goodwill gesture."

"A peace offering?" Abram frowned, clearly not sure if this was something to ponder, let alone pursue.

"What if you sent the twins over to deliver the pies?" Lizzie suggested.

"Certainly not Leah," Ida said.

Nodding in agreement over that, Abram rose and wandered into the dark front room, and Lizzie heard him sink down into a chair.

"Well, what do ya say?" she asked Ida, who came and threw a towel over her shoulder and lifted out Lydiann. The toddler's soft bottom looked as shriveled as a prune.

"It would be nice to get things smoothed over with the Masts, but I'm sure Abram will want to think on it some more," Ida said as she wrapped Lydiann, bawling and squirming, in the towel before marching out of the room and upstairs.

A couple of tasty pies just might begin to repair the breach, Lizzie thought, removing her wet black apron and going to hang it up in the utility room. If so, how foolish of them to have waited all this time.

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1 he next day was a no-church Sunday, a day set aside not for Preaching service but for rest, reading the Good Book, and visiting relatives and friends.

Mary Ruth held the reins while Hannah sat to her left, silent as a rock. "Dat and Mamma must've thought this over for a gut long time, us goin' to Grasshopper Level with pies for the Masts," Mary Ruth muttered.

"Two long years Mamma's been thinking of what to do, I spect," Hannah sgfid softly.

"Aunt Lizzie baked till late last night is what I was told. Must've been a hurry-up job."

"While we were at singing, maybe," Hannah replied.

Mary Ruth scratched her head. "By the way, did you happen to see who Leah rode home with last night?"

"I thought 'twas Gid, though I can't be certain."

"Won't Dat be happy if it was?"

Hannah made a little sound, then spoke. "Mamma prob'ly will be, too, seein' Leah's been hurt so awful bad . . . the way Jonas did her wrong."

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"Wasn't all Jonas's fault, don't forget. Takes two, ya know." Mary Ruth felt she had to remind Hannah.

"Wouldn't any parent be pleased to have Smithy Gid as a son-in-law?"

"Can you see Gid and Leah as husband and wife? Honestly, can you?" asked Mary Ruth.

Hannah sighed. "Maybe so," she said in almost a whisper. Then abruptly she changed the subject. "Mamma's nothin' short of wonderful-gut. She never once thinks of Leah as her niece, now, does she?"

Mary Ruth found this turn of topic rather interesting. They had spoken behind closed doors of Lizzie's being Leah's birth mother after Mamma had shared with them, almost two years ago, the story of their aunt's wild days. Occasionally the twins would rehash their feelings, so great had been their surprise. "Seems to me, Leah is just as much Mamma's as you and I are."

Mary Ruth meant this with all of her heart. "I wouldn't want things to change with Leah just because we know the truth 'bout Aunt Lizzie."

"Me neither." Hannah smoothed out her long green dress.

"Anyway, I could never think of Leah as merely our first cousin, even though she is that. The heart ties that unite are so strong, ain't so?" She surprised herself saying as much. "We'll always be sisters."

The tie that binds. . .

Now was as good a time as any for Hannah to bring up the knotty fact they were no longer double courting with the Stoltzfus boys . . . that there was a sort of estrangement between the two of them.

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But Hannah said nothing, and they rode on in silence for ic I;ist mile.

As die twins pulled in the lane at the Masts' farmhouse, Mary Ruth noticed several of the younger Mast children he impering about. But when the youngsters spotted who was diiving up in the carriage, they quickly disappeared into the

] In MISC.

"Just as I expected," Mary Ruth said. "Now what?"

"We could end up sittin' here till the cows come home if we ilon't get out and make our delivery," Hannah replied.

"I wish Aunt Lizzie had come 'stead of us." Mary Ruth felt Mini only embarrassed but put out at having to come here wlicn the Masts had chosen of their own accord to shun thorn.

I lannah was the one to stand up first, taking hold of the pii-s neatly graced in Mamma's wicker food hamper. "I'm not iiliaid of Cousin Fannie. I never did her wrong." With that hi 10 climbed down out of the buggy.

Taken aback by her sister's uncharacteristic boldness, Mary Ruth breathed in deeply and stepped out, too. "Which of us is goin' to knock on the back door?" j "Why, both of us. That's who" came Hannah's quick reply.

Mary Ruth wasn't so sure any of this was such a good idea, V't she was shocked at the way Hannah's feet pounded against

the ground. Sure was a first, far as she could remember

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Hannah spouting off without uttering a word, using only her feet to do the talking!

Not to be outdone, Mary Ruth knocked on the kitchen screen door, wishing the whole ordeal were over. She could see past the screened-in porch and into the long kitchen, part of the bench next to the table showing. But there was no one in sight, which was downright peculiar on a "visiting" Sunday.

"Your turn to knock," she told Hannah, who promptly did so.

They waited, but the house remained apparently uninhabited. The call of birds seemed louder than before.

"How much longer should we wait?" Hannah asked.

Mary Ruth glanced over her shoulder, looking for any sign of life, but there were no sounds coming from the barn nor, naturally, from the fields, it being the Lord's Day and all. "I say we leave," she said at last.

"But . . . what 'bout the pies?" It was Hannah who was wide-eyed now.

"We'll have 'em for supper ourselves."

"What'll Mamma say?"

Then, just as Hannah was speaking, here came Cousin Fannie shuffling along toward the door like she really didn't want to at all. She poked her head out.

Before Fannie could speak, Mary Ruth said quickly, "We brought you something from Mamma and Aunt Lizzie."

A frown flickered across Fannie's face as she eyed the pies. "I'm sorry, but we can't accept them." She started to close the screen door.

"Oh, but Aunt Lizzie wants you to have them. She made them special for you and Cousin Peter," Mary Ruth explained,

awkward having to beg someone to accept such deli-

icious.

But Fannie soundly latched the screen door, then backed away, shaking her head before turning and walking to the door. Hi, then.

"Well, I declare!" said Mary Ruth, tugging on Hannah's sleeve. "Come along, sister. They don't deserve Aunt Lizzie's pies!" With that they hurried to the buggy and got in. The

buggy pulled them slowly up to the widest section of the barnyard, (then circled around to come back down the lane.

Mary Ruth spotted two small heads peering out the back window. "Look," she whispered. "Isn't that Mandie and Jake?"

"Sure looks like them to me," Hannah agreed.

"So . . . we've been out-and-out refused. Well, isn't this a lint' lowdy-do!"

"Something to talk about at supper tonight," Hannah said.

"Won't Mamma be irked?"

Hannah nodded. "Irked and offended both."

"It's really ippo bad our families can't make amends." Mary Kuih was certain both Mamma and Dat would have a reacclimi ro this. Aunt Lizzie, too.

"What if we give them one more chance try 'n' break

I1 if ice, so to speak," Hannah suggested.

"And do what?"

"We could both write to Rebekah and Katie one last I inu- . . . see what comes of it. See if they'll reply."

"What a waste of time and stationery. But go ahead, if you want."

"I say, best ask Mamma what she thinks." Hannah seemed

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to make a to-do of crossing her arms and sighing.

"Well, now, why are you upset at me, Hannah? I'm not the one ignorin' your letters." Mary Ruth paused. "Whoever said twins had to be baptized into the church the same year, anyway?" There she'd said exactly what was on her mind.

Hannah began to sniffle, which turned into a full-blown sob in a hurry. Mary Ruth had no desire to offer one bit of comfort. If Hannah wanted to cry her eyes out right here on the road, in plain sight . . . well, let her.

Half a mile later, she spotted Luke and Naomi Bontrager riding in their enclosed carriage. "You best dry your eyes," she cautioned. "Here comes the bishop's grandson. Word might get back that you looked mighty sour today."

Hannah turned to face her, quick as a wink. "What do I care? Truth is, the bishop himself already knows what you're up to!"

"What do you mean?" Mary Ruth didn't want to believe her ears.

"Bishop Bontrager has been askin' why you aren't joinin' church with me."

"And what're you sayin' to that?"

"Seems to me that's your problem."

Mary Ruth bit her lip. Luke and Naomi were smiling and waving now as they approached on the opposite side of the road. "Wave back," she whispered to Hannah.

Meekly Hannah did so, and Mary Ruth called to them, "Hullo, Luke and Naomi!" waving and grinning for all she was worth. Can't make things any worse . . . might actually helpsome, she reasoned. :

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I "('oiildn't you offer a smile with your wave?" she asked

I 1(111! l.ll I.

I "I 'iiln't feel like it," Hannah said when the other buggyliiiiil |hissed by.

I M;uy Ruth knew she could easily say the wrong thing if jiii' < ipcied her mouth just now, so she pressed her lips shut. I I himah, however, couldn't seem to drop the argument of Mtiry Ruth joining church. " 'To him that knoweth to do piod, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.'" Hannah stated the mil Ml i'd verse oft quoted amongst the People. I Wi i liout a shadow of doubt, Mary Ruth knew Hannah was llinj't-ther peeved at her about rejecting baptism this year. It jvii'. beginning to cloud nearly everything, even something as iiHHHcnt as a ride in the family carriage. I won't cut short my |l/m\r/i/)ringe.f she thought. I'll join church when I feel like it.

On Sunday, July 17, Leah met up with Naomi Kauffman huMiniger in Deacon Stoltzfus's barnyard. She, along with Mamma, Aunt Lizzie, and the

twins, had been milling about pih the other women folk, waiting for the ministers to arrive ni'lorc Preaching service.

"Hullo, Leah, nice to see ya," Naomi greeted Leah pi inly, taking both her hands and squeezing them gently. [I've been wishin' we could talk."

They strolled away from the large group of women and [nting children. "Everything all right, Naomi?" I There was a distinct dampness to the day, which put a bit

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of a wave in Naomi's hair the wispy strands at the nape of her neck, at least.

"Oh, jah, things are fine." Naomi's eyes lit up. "I've been meaning to tell ya my news. I'm in the family way. Come this December, Luke and I will have us our first wee babe. Close to Christmas .. . when your mamma's baby is due."

"This is gut news and I'm ever so happy for you." She kissed Naomi's cheek. "Luke must be awful excited, too."

"He's holdin' his breath for a son, naturally."

"Maybe you'll get two boys," Leah replied, recalling that twins seemed plentiful on Naomi's mother's side. In fact, there was a set of triplet boys.

"I s'pose I wouldn't mind several babies at once. Whatever the Good Lord gives us will be all right."

"I'm glad I heard directly from you," Leah said as they walked back toward the women. She was truly happy for Sadie's former girlfriend, and hearing the news from Naomi got her thinking of her own future and the possibility

of many children. After all, Mamma was expecting this baby in her midforties. Leah counted the years, thinking ahead. If I were to marry Gid by next year, I'd have plenty of childbearing years ahead of me. . . .

But she knew it was better not to think in terms of what might be ... or worse, what might have been where Jonas was concerned. No, she would trust the Lord God, just as she had promised to do at her baptism. She would honor the Almighty One all the days of her life, and He alone would lead her. If God willed that she should marry and have children, then so be it. If not, she would try to be as cheerful and content with her lot as Aunt Lizzie. : 85 O a c r if,

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H[Thinking of her aunt, she spied Lizzie chattering with the

H|u mi's wife and had to smile. Aunt Lizzie's a sly one, she

H[, , (diking to Ezra and Elias's mother, of all things!

^M 11 w:is (airly common knowledge among Dat, Mamma, and

^Hni I -i-'io that two of the Stoltzfus boys were awful sweet on

^nmsih ;ind Mary Ruth. Mamma had confided this to Leah,

^n, in (urn, had mentioned something to Dat in the barn

Hp-Wtvk. Dat, bless his heart, had tried to act like he didn't

1 now too much about it, but Leah could see the helpless smile

i tlelitfhi on her father's face. Since they all knew who was

, In) inn I what was what, it was best they keep quiet now and

iillnw tin* courting process to take over. Could be, as soon as

it vmi li'om this fall, Hannah might be wed.

.V. lor Mary Ruth, she'd most likely missed out on also
{mi! i yiujj; then. Much better to take her time and be sure than
In in.'h into something and be sorry later, thought Leah. She
HttjI'hM'il she ought to think likewise about her courtship with
^Bllliv Cud, because he was visibly smitten . . . and, truth be
^nvn, she was falling for him, too.

H| ('mild it be Hannah and I will marry during the same wedding ^Huh:'
she wondered, spotting Gid's shock of light brown hair ^ivr i he throng of
men preparing to go inside the barn for Ht Sunday meeting. Her heart
skipped a little as he caught H| vyv and then turned discreetly, pretending
not to have ^ni ItiT. The People's way. . .

^M hlttmma might faint if she knew how fond Gid is of me . . . ^K> often
he says he loves me. I have yet to tell him, though. I f be aver so sure.

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.Lorraine Schwartz had been so deeply moved by the previous Sunday's
sermon that she readily agreed to go with the Nolts to the midweek service.
She had not a hunch how

Henry would take this, but she was altogether eager to attend the Mennonite
house of worship again, and she told him about it just as he was sitting

down for supper on Wednesday night. "I hope you won't mind if I go out this evening for a few hours." She went on to say what she was planning.

He was slow to speak, evidently tired. "Are you trying to keep up with your son?"

She hadn't thought of it in that light, but now that Henry had mentioned it, she assumed Robert's quest for the spiritual might have influenced her, as well. "Why don't you come along?" she suddenly suggested. "You might be surprised and enjoy yourself." _.

"My desk is piled high with paper work." The tone of his voice caught her off guard; he was insulted.

"Are you all right with this, Henry?"⁸⁷

He looked across the table, his brow creased. "Go, if you like."

Immediately their suppertime talk took a turn when Henry told her he was toying with the idea of expanding the clinic, by offering an internship to a medical student and building a room to make room for more patients.

This was news to her, but she liked the idea. Henry, who was close to his forty-fifth birthday, had aged considerably in the past year virtually before her eyes. She speculated it was due to keeping himself busy with an overabundance of patients, more than enough for one country doctor, but she sometimes worried about his frequent lethargy. Even

I lie liad much to teach anyone interested in medicine.

I I k-nry's need to extend himself to new blood coming up

I the ranks surely had something to do with his sons' lack of

Iricsi in the medical profession Derek having chosen a

IIlcr's life and Robert, more recently, the Lord's work. She

1* almost certain Robert's abrupt fork in the road had

lei u-i I I lenry more than he realized.

I "Any hope oftterek getting leave time for Christmas?"

m asked, changing the subject.

I "I I I'll have off two weeks, I would presume."

I "I lave you written him lately?"

I "I did a week ago," said Henry.

I (iihhI, she thought. Her husband was keeping in touch

lli ilu'ir younger son in spite of Derek's stubborn silence.

I I Icnry shook his head and reached for his coffee. "Deep

W11, our boy does have a beating heart."

I 8hr was glad to hear this from Henry's lips and watched

w\ v thank his coffee. Slowly she finished off her carrot cake

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and ice cream. If only Henry might consent to go with her to church, even a single time, she believed the pockets of stress under his eyes might soften and the spring in his step might return.

Hannah could scarcely wait to show Mary Ruth the letter from Grasshopper Level. They were already in their cotton nightgowns, each having brushed the other's hair, when Hannah asked her twin to "guess who'd written."

Mary Ruth shrugged. "I'm too tired to care, really." She slipped under the sheet and snuggled into bed.

"Well, listen to this," Hannah said. "It's a letter from our j
cousin Rebekah Mast!"]

"What?" i

"I saved it till just now." j

Hopping out of bed, Mary Ruth hurried to peer over Han- j
nah's shoulder. "Quick, read it to me." j

Dear Cousin Hannah, i

This is the last letter I'm planning to send to you! I haven't i even told Kiamma I'm writing, but you need to know she's i awful peeved you and Mary Ruth would come here. We don't need no pies and no letters, neither, from you Ebersols.

If I sound upset, I am. After all, your sister Leah got our brother Jonas shunned by talking him into joining church over there in your neck of the woods. I won't say everything that's on my mind, but we wish to goodness he'd never laid eyes on --,

her! }

Please don't bother to answer this letter. We have nothing i89 H
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I im -.icv U) each other. Only one good thing came out of this
tiirjul mess Sadie andjonas have found some true happiness
mil iiv.st. That's all I best be saying.

I So long,

I Rebekah Mast

I "VtV 11, I declare!" Mary Ruth said a bit too loudly.

I "SIill! You'll wake up the whole house." Hannah shoved

My Iriirr into the envelope and stuffed it in her drawer.

IVCIimi ;i horrible cousin."

I "Vnii can say that again." Looking mighty gloomy now,

why Ruth headed back to her side of the bed.

"I didn't think Rebekah had it in her to be so rude."

I lYhiry Ruth pulled up the sheet and muttered, "No doubt r< I- y's echoing
what Cousins Fannie and Peter are sayin' and iliinl' in),' 'bout us."

I liiMiiuh put out the oil lamp on the dresser and crawled mi. i lied. "I knew
she was bossy and liked to talk a big talk, I'in i his . . ." She almost wished
she'd never bothered to open 'li' i uvelope, especially not at night. Now the
cutting words

Id encircle her thoughts, and she needed her sleep. i .-'How she planned to
help Leah mow all the yards i <, hick, and side then burn the week's trash.
That alone

- ' ! I I ;ike nearly the whole morning.

I 'oii'i worry yourself over Becky Mast," said Mary Ruth, i 11iii|,' over and stroking her hand. "Just consider the

|.ili, I s'pose."

II icy lay quietly for a time; then Mary Ruth spoke again. A i mi I izzie and I will be canning quarts and quarts of pickles

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tomorrow. Who's gonna look after Lydiann?"

Hannah shared with her what she planned to do, laughing a little. "Maybe Dawdi John will come over and look after our baby sister."

"That's not such a gut idea, do you think? Not as quick on her feet as Lydiann is gettin' to be." Mary Ruth had a point there.

"Jah, he may be hard-pressed to keep up with our baby sister; it's a good thing Dawdi John's hip has improved with Dr. Schwartz's help."

Hannah was anxious for sleep to come.

Mary Ruth yawned and turned to face her. "Do you ever wonder who it was Lizzie must've loved enough to give up her innocence before marry in'?"

"I hate to admit it, but I've thought about the same thing. . . ." She didn't want to speculate, but she guessed Leah's birth father must surely be the son of one of the Hickory Hollow ministers. And, if so, well . . . wouldn't it be interesting to know just who? "Best be say in' good night now," she said, hoping to turn off the chatter.

Ida found herself standing in the hallway where she had stood that first morning twenty years ago now here, at the top of the stairs, where the window looked out to the southeast, to the Peachey's fine-looking spread of land. Tonight, though, she did not care to admire the smithy's acres and

acres of corn and grazing land. No, she was looking up, high overhead. The stars captured her attention this night.

Bless the Lord, o my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
She paused to rest her hands on her middle. O

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Jeffrey < iiii, place your hand of blessing on this babe of mine, fjjgjmmifig
mi restlessly within, she prayed silently. HMeif ;.ln' stood, suffering
twinges in her stomach on the ^B .Npui where so long ago she had
accidentally overheard ^Hiin ifling young Lizzie what she must do about
her baby. ^^Jf li;u I begun to soften from the near-rebellious state she ^Hin
when she and Abram brought her home to live with ^H|n Ma recalled, too,
that Abram had repeatedly ques^Hnl I i.;:ii- to no avail that same day.
"Your baby's father . . . P""! in In:" Her sister could only weep, not once
mentioning

i< youiif, mans name.

i 'ijnv/v s/ie'll want to share the truth with Leah someday, Ida l|liniiK(lil,
Mill staring at the sky strewn with stars. But deep IIIimli!*, in ihat near-
sacred place where a woman frets silently HBt her dear ones, Ida was
fearful. Nervous for Lizzie and ^Hl I'nih, for what such a revelation might
do to the good Bwfl u-liii ionship they enjoyed. But, most of all, she
worried El \ii;ini. If Leah were ever to know her blood father, would I i i
,1111 lose his rightful, even special place in Leah's eyes? She I "ilil only
imgame what hurt this could cause him and the I All of them, really.

['hi- moved away from the window, wincing as she I id her stomach . . . her
unborn child, wondering if

!| "' natural father even knew he had a daughter. She liililrd down the hall,
stopping at the first bedroom to look Hit mi l.i-nh, sound asleep, then on to
Hannah and Mary H^i'. mom, where they, too, slept peacefully, like two
small ^H*n" nearly nose to nose.

^L'lu'cking, observing, loving . . . her beloved family of ^^M, minus one.
Would the hands of time turn things around

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for Sadie? Would the grace and goodness of God the blessed Holy Spirit
woo her to Him faster than the People's shun? She prayed it would be so.

How she loved her girls, all of them equally, and she prayed as she walked
the hallway, speaking to the Lord silently, imploring Him for each one's
future. Ida longed for them to walk uprightly, to know the Holy One of
Israel not only as their heavenly Father, but to embrace the atonement of
His Son, the Lord Jesus.

Bring peace to this house . . . to my heart, she prayed without speaking. At
last she headed back to the bedroom where Lydiann slept in a wooden crib
in the corner and Abram lay sound asleep, not knowing she had been
walking softly and praying earnestly. Not knowing that all too often, of late,
the wee hours were filled with sharp pain, and sleep was far from her.

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Hilly sicpped gingerly into August, and soon after September Kdiiic in on
wild turkeys' feet, surprising the local folk with |)in. li cooler temperatures
and buckets of rain. The unsus|i i ing gobblers wandered brazenly out of
the woods, becomlih unwelcome visitors to the cornfield, as if daring
someone li> -.hoot them before small-game hunting season.

I Mamma observed her forty-fifth birthday on the second Ui iv >l
September without much ado other than a card shower fliiin the
women^folk. Leah said the hydrangea bushes near IiH- house had seen fit
to mix their brilliant hues with some lit 111 bronze on cue for Mamma's
special day, the first hint of I'tn; and lazy autumn days leading the way for
the harvest and fli lilling.

in V'tober's gleaming red and yellow apples rapidly turned \ applesauce, cider, and strudel, and the musty scent of wet liws led smack-dab into November's wedding season and

in m i;lory of deepest autumn.

It 11 was the Sunday evening before Thanksgiving Day when Liil) consented to ride along with Smithy Gid to visit his

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ailing uncle Ike. She was glad for the heavy woolen lap robe protecting them, since the open carriage provided no shelter from twilight's falling temperatures.

Gid held the reins with one hand and steadied his har-

monica in the other, playing one tune after another as they rode along. In between songs, he whistled, as cheerful as she'd ever known him to be.

We're practically betrothed, she thought but instead quickly brought up the subject of his uncle. "Has a doctor seen him for his pneumonia yet?"

"Aunt Martha wants to call in the hex doctor, but Uncle Ike won't hear of it. Seems they're at a standstill, but I'm sure my uncle will have his say-so."

Leah thought on this. "What do you think of powwowing, Gid?"

"I don't rightly know. Pop says there ain't nothin' wrong with having the hex doctor have a look-see when somebody's sick, but Mamm, now, there's a whole 'nother story."

"She goes to the medical doctor, then?"

"I believe Mamm would rather die than have white witch-

craft goin's-on in our house. And that's just how she says it, too."

White witchcraft? Leah pondered that. Seemed her own mamma lined up with Miriam Peachey on this matter. Dat, now, he didn't seem to care one way or the other neither did Dawdi John. Aunt Lizzie, though, liked to have had a fit when Leah mentioned it some time back in regard to the day she was born. "Was there an Amish midwife or hex doctor on hand?" she'd asked, to which Lizzie had replied, "No midwife . . . not the powwow doctor, neither one," turning an 95IV.

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iJiLiIarumt shade of peach when Leah mentioned the latter.

"Wlint do the ministers say 'bout powwowing?" she asked.

' lid shook his head. "They'd prob'ly say they have more m.>i irrniit i lungs to think about."

| -Veined to her the brethren ought to have an opinion one h i .11 i he other. Still, such a topic would never be preached :iuy Sunday sermon.

Recalling that Jonas used to write her about certain Scrip:li\rn not being used in sermons here in Gobbler's Knob, she ilii'IIKIu "I asking Gid what he thought of that. But she kept in pence, not wanting to touch on the past good or bad.

The road from Quarryville was particularly deserted this evening. Most folk were indoors keeping warm on such a brisk night. Robert Schwartz assumed. He wanted to surprise his parents by arriving early for Thanksgiving but had been justified to attend the Oak Shade Mennonite Church before it was too late; northeast to Gobbler's Knob.

The minister had begun by speaking slowly to the congregation in an almost conversational tone. As time passed, however, his discourse had become swift and strong in its delivery. Robert had been enthralled by the message, "Finding God for Your Life."

"As sons and daughters of Christ Jesus, we have an obligation to seek out His will and live it," the preacher had intimated. "We must delve into the Word of God for answers. What would God have you do with your remaining days on earth? Will He send you forth into the field, for it is white with harvest?"

unto harvest. The words had seeped into Robert's

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heart, taking hold. To think what he might have accomplished for God in the weeks and months leading up to the invasion at Utah Beach in Normandy. The Allied air forces had dropped all those bombs . . . twenty thousand tons on France alone. Too many of his buddies had died on those bombing missions. And he'd lost his sweetheart, a true flower of a girl, though an unbeliever. If only I'd known the Lord then, he thought sadly as he remembered Verena.

Tonight he had gladly received the preacher's fervent words. They, along with many months of Bible study at the Mennonite college, had converged

in an overwhelming epiphany, clinching his decision to become a country preacher. Truly, he wished he might have known God on some significant level during the war. What comfort and support he might have offered to his comrades and others had he been a believer then. Certainly the chaplains weren't the only ones imparting spiritual consolation during those horrendous days and nights. He recalled there had been a few Christian boys who had shared the Good News among the young, yet hardened soldiers. He would have joined ranks with them had he known then what he knew now. To think he might have saved a life or two, or more ... for God. Instead, he had aided in the death of many enemies of the Allied forces a martial victory, true, but a defeat for eternity, nevertheless.

Now, on the drive home, the words of the seasoned minister continued to resound in his thinking. He felt nearly euphoric as he drove the forsaken back road. Something was compelling him to follow through, to get his license to preach despite his father's disapproval, which was ongoing and would surely be voiced during the coming holiday. Still, his spirit

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m k'cii i<nched in a way unlike any he had ever felt in the pHyr i-liuivh where his parents had infrequently attended BDUkIi ilie years. There parishioners dutifully congregated Ifuliyy mornings to hear a social gospel that trumpeted Jesus' tUHnilarian accomplishments, with few references to the m urn! living Word of God. If Robert was not mistaken, the Bill i-ililice with its numerous stained-glass windows was Mine, up here fairly soon on the left side of the road. I I'm liere to answer your call, O Lord, he prayed, gripping It leering wheel as the road narrowed and the dense woods li'.i-il in on either side.

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I I icy had been talking about the fact that neither of them .veil versed in the Holy Scripture when Leah first heard a . in I he distance. The wail came closer as Gid's horse

I i he courting buggy back from Uncle Ike's farmhouse ml c Jobbler's Knob.

Well, Gid," Leah said, clutching her throat. "Someone I >y must be hurt." The ambulance was approaching fast behind them, and

Leah skillfully reined the horse onto the dirt shoulder and I h.-J while the shrill siren pierced their eardrums.

"Wanna follow and see if we can be of some help?" Gid

As the ambulance had sped by.

"Sure, if we can catch up."

The accident, as it turned out, was less than a mile away, but by the time they arrived, the ambulance had already 'il :md left. Two patrol cars blocked the road in both

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directions, so Gid parked the buggy a distance away, leaving Leah holding the reins. "I'll be back right quick." He jumped out of the buggy. "Will you be all right here alone?"

She said she would, but up ahead the sight of a car crisscross in the road, its headlights shining across the mowed cornfield, frightened her no end. A lame horse, which looked to be awful young more like a pony, really was being led limping off the road by one of the policemen.

Then she noticed a young Englisher sitting in the backseat of one of the police cars. Could it be he was the driver of the car? Had he caused the accident, maybe startling the young horse?

Heart pounding, she stood up for a better look and saw the splintered remains of what looked to be a pony cart. On the east side of the road, a

farmhouse stood way back snuggled against tall trees. She wasn't so sure in the dark, but she thought this might be the homestead of Deacon Stoltzfus and his large family.

She did think it peculiar that, by now, none of the family had come running down the lane to offer assistance. Then it dawned on her that maybe hopefully not one of their children had been riding in the crumpled pony cart, in which case the deacon and probably his wife and some of the youngest children would have gone along in the ambulance, leaving the oldest girls to look after the rest. The older boys, Leroy, Gideon, Ezra, and Elias, most likely were out riding around with their girlfriends, unaware of the dreadful accident.

A lump caught in her throat. Dear God, please help whoever was hurt here tonight, she prayed.

The distinctive ripeness of late autumn closed in around her. The Sacrifice

was in the air when a sudden wind came up, Leah felt its eerie chill in the air. Her shawl near. Oh, she wished Gid would hurry. It felt like she was on earth had happened.

"The pony and cart shot out from the lane onto the road, didn't they?" the police officer quizzed Robert.

Pointing to the concealed treed lane, Robert explained, "It's down there, leading down from the farmhouse. The cart just came out of nowhere, right in front of me . . . before I could ever stop." He felt sick with the memory of the youth lying unconscious in the road, broken and bleeding. "My car hit it broadside."

The policeman filled out an accident report, scrutinizing Leah's driver's license, then inquired about his father. "Is Mr. Schwartz your old man?"

"That's right."

The policeman looked him over. "Say . . . aren't you the one who fought in the war?"

I li- felt his shoulders tense. "I ... well, sir, God must have i n watchng out for me overseas." That's all he could say il'i'iii the past when the present and possibly the future ii.i. Muring him hard in the face.

Returning his attention to the accident report, the officer u.Ui-il, "The lad's Old Order Amish, so I doubt there will be rli.ii|(i'.s filed against you, although it's clear you weren't in the \ i 'i i|!- If this goes the way most accidents do involving them, yii'll never hear boo from anybody. The Amish practice nonii i lance."

Nimresistance ...

Robert swallowed hard, hoping the boy would survive the

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accident for both the boy's sake and his family's. He had certainly put into practice every first-aid technique he'd ever learned from his father in tending to him his body crushed and bleeding trying his best to save the kid's life.

"You were driving the speed limit or less?" he was asked.

"Yes, sir." He waited as the policeman finished filling out the accident report, feeling a desperate coldness steal over him. Robert shuddered in the darkness as the reality of what had happened here sunk in. "Can someone please phone me later? I'd like to know the boy's name and where I might visit him," he said.

A visit to the hospital was the least he could do; he wished he could do more. No doubt there would already be Amish friends and relatives gathering at the hospital, as was their custom. They would not want the boy and his family to suffer through the dark night alone.

"Someone from the station will be in touch with you, Mr. Schwartz." The policeman's voice startled him. "Take care, son."

"Why . . . thank you," he heard himself say. Robert's words, though sincere, sounded hollow and distant even to his

own ears.

Due to the lateness of the hour and the heavy cloud cover, the road leading home was even darker now as Robert headed down the final stretch. His memory haunted him as he replayed the accident scene again and again. The shattered pony cart, the moaning boy lying in the road, the mournful

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miph ill i lie wounded horse ...

I "ii| <n\1 in heaven . . . please let the boy survive. Please, I 11im live," Robert implored. He slowed the car to a near Lwl "lie rounded the bend and saw the yard light on at his Ifpiii ' house. How can I begin to tell my family what has hapWfwil (his night . . . what I have done?

I "li w;is a terrible mess up there," Gid told Leah when he

liiiiii'd at last, somewhat out of breath. "If somebody didn't

It m i In if wreck, I'd be mighty surprised."

I " A11yone we know?" She was unnerved.

I t ud seemed dazed as he took the reins from her, sitting

In 11- Im the longest time without speaking. And then finally

I did. " Hummel, this slaughter on the roads cars and car-

Imi'.<. just keeps . . . happening." His voice faltered.

I I oiil) was shaking. What if one of her own kin was in such

It .irddent? The People reckoned tragedies as being God's

Vwign will, yet she shuddered to think of losing a sister to

Li I,

I "The pon cart belonged to young Elias Stoltzfus," Gid

Iih I hi last. "He was severely injured tonight . . . if not mor-

lily"

I I.eiili gasped. Not Mary Ruth's beau! Suddenly she was Hi nostricken at the thought of her own sister. Was she riding haw with Elias tonight? she wondered. Was she?

"Was there anyone else in the cart?" Leah managed to ask.

"I don't know."

"Are you certain it was Elias who was hit?"

l. 3 id nodded slowly, his expression sad.

If the boy did not survive, many of the People would

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gather as a compassionate community for the wake at the Stoltzfus house, offering to help in any way possible. Leah determined that if the worst were to be, she would volunteer to help with the milking and whatnot. Anything to assist and by so doing lessen the immediate pain of loss.

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Leah arrived home, where she was relieved to learn Mary Ruth was safe. Hours later she witnessed firsthand how much

Mary Ruth cared for Elias the whole family did. When they saw the tall figure of Leroy, the oldest Stoltzfus boy, on the back step, face drawn, eyes red . . . coming to deliver the death message, Mary Ruth burst out sobbing and fled from the kitchen.

Her heartrending cries were heard all through the house, and the pitiful sound struck Leah at the core of her very heart, for she knew too well something of the sting of Mary Ruth's loss.

Leah, Hannah, and Mamma offered their sympathy as best they could, but Mary Ruth would not be comforted. Her weeping continued as Leah sat on the side of the twins' bed, stroking Mary Ruth's hair while Hannah lay next to her twin, her slender arm wrapped around her. Mamma, after a time, kissed each of them good night, then slipped off to her own room, sniffing every bit as much as Leah recalled her doing the weeks following Sadie's shunning.

Miserable and helpless to know what to say or do, Leah decided now was a good time to pray not the familiar rote prayers of their childhood, but one that came directly from

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m IntmI. The kind she knew Mamma and Aunt Lizzie often ifiynl, ;uid the kind of earnest prayer she herself had offered I I he woods, following her heartbreak over Jonas.

Niiiiiin^ in the darkness, she silently pleaded for divine pinion lor her grief-stricken younger sister, as well as the ptknilu-arted Stoltzfus family.

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Lvestless and unable to sleep, Mary Ruth tiptoed down the stairs after midnight, leaving the warmth of her bed to hurry outdoors. The night was as still as the animals resting in the stable area of the barn. Deftly she reached for the sides of the old wooden ladder and climbed to the hayloft without making a sound, wanting to sit alone in the midst of the baled hay.

She anguished at the memory of her last conversation with Elias in the barnyard following Preaching service yesterday. He had asked her to go "on a lark, for some fun before going to the singing." Ezra, it seemed, had gotten first dibs on the courting buggy and was planning to spend time with Hannah again, just the two of them. So Elias had wanted to use his pony cart.

If Ezra had included Elias and me, she thought, my dear beau might still be alive!

Now in spite of Elias's fondness for her and hers for him, he was gone forever, soon to be buried in the People's cemetery not so far away. Her own beloved.

Too exhausted to ponder further what might've happened

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flhingN Inul been much different this night, she pulled the Rill Illlll'k shawl about her and wrapped her arms around her

I1 . Stissy, I he new pup short for Sassafras soon found I I he droopy-eyed pet comforted Mary Ruth by licking her I i . vherks, remaining by her side as she wept till close to li u

j I fiiiinnh stared at the new handkerchief she had quickly | ' lor liliass's grieving mother. Somehow, she hoped to find I in slip it to the poor woman, though seeing the crowd | 'Miners gathered at the Stoltzfus house, she didn't know |' >i when that might be possible.

j lnh| now, though, standing in the backyard with the other
i-mm'u of her family, waiting to enter the farmhouse, Hannah

Ml In't shake the fear of death knocking on her own door,
i""HiK loo soon, before she was ready for it. She'd long strug-

* l ihlh way. Like Elias had been, she felt she was much too
: in die, though if such a thing should happen, even pre-
'ii'ly, the People believed it was the divine order of

> I lannah had been taught this from her childhood, and
i' r, it baptized church member now, having made her kneel'

HHnv back in September with Ezra, she felt she, too, must
^Hu c the Lord God's supreme plan for each of His chil-

^HYi'l she still battled the horror of death when it was to

^Hjitnd how it might happen . . . and, most of all, how dif-

^Ht> might be to get to the other side. She felt her neck

^Hlxcucdingly warm with the worry. :

^Hll' what did the Lord God heavenly Father want with

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young Elias up in heaven when there was so much left for him to do down here? She guessed there must be some mighty important work waiting for him in Glory Land maybe something that required lots of time. Jah, maybe that's why he wastaken so early.

Robert was reduced to sitting in the backseat, a passenger in his father's car as he and his parents traveled down the road to the Amish funeral on Tuesday morning. Not able to sleep or eat since the accident, he had thought of staying home and would have preferred to, but his mother had slipped into his room after breakfast and attempted to console him, reminding him the mishap was simply not his fault. "Any driver mighl have hit the boy. It was impossible for you to see him," she'd insisted. Then she had encouraged Robert to "come along with us, in spite of the accident. Share your sadness with the Amish community. The entire Stoltzfus family will be there, I am sure."

And they were, all thirteen of them eleven remaining sad-faced children, some teenagers, and their somber parents. Robert had gone immediately with his father to the hospital, following the accident, but he had not had the chance to sec Elias. Sadly the young man had been pronounced dead on arrival, and Robert could merely offer his condolences to the solemn parents. How very taxing that had been. He instantly deemed himself a murderer, however unintentional the ad. Most difficult for Robert was knowing full well that if he had never gone to the Quarryville church meeting and had driven straight home from college in Harrisonburg, Virginia, lie might have been home this morning reading or watching tel

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m lutoii, and young Elias would have been alive.

Hull' <l''i's t'l'is nightmam/i thing fit into God's plan? he agot'lli Wluil exactly would the dynamic Mennonite preacher ,# lo Niiy iilxiut the

circumstances Robert so unpredictably m1 himself in? The policeman at the collision scene had

11 correct in his assessment; no charges had been discussed \ Robert nor filed. He had been driving well under the Mil limit, so there was no question of a reckless driving H'Hf. He felt he should be somewhat relieved, but he was (Iling of the kind. A sense of despondency encompassed

n, mid he was miserable with the knowledge that, however

mi'leiiH, Ik- was responsible for snuffing out a young life.

i .i ling out the car window, he was aware of the blur that

one Amish farmhouse, then pastureland, cornfields,

iinl tinnlher farmhouse, and so on, one after another. He had ..iitvlvril the horrors of war on foreign soil only to come home .mil iidclntally kill an innocent civilian.

Si mined with grief and struggling to sit through the long lnili'iiil in the house of worship house of sorrow, Mary Ruth ilimiuhr she attempted to keep her hands folded, yet every i i ill I'll she noticed she had been unconsciously wringing her Imh. II iM'chief. At one point Hannah leaned close to her and ' u lii i i rod, "I believe that's the driver of the automobile."

In' sighed ever so deeply, her breath coming in ragged in iji!< us she fought tears and looked over at the man Hannah itwiiinril to be Robert Schwartz. The mere thought of a car |i|m\vIi\ into Elias's vulnerable pony cart made her wince; it Mil in \l lo impossible for a person to survive such an impact, ill. I>.iitied the urge to despise the Englisher. Who does he

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think he is, coming to the funeral?

Somehow, as the service progressed, she was able to deny her tears, having spent all day yesterday and Sunday night, too, wearing herself out in distress over her beau. Through sheer will, she had managed to go with Leah and Aunt Lizzie to the Stoltzfus farm early yesterday morning to help with some of the cooking, cleaning, and tending to the small chil' dren, just as other church members had.

Presently she was in desperate straits, trying hard to listen to the first sermon, thirty minutes long and given in Pennsylvania Dutch, followed by Scriptures read in High German, which she did not understand. Who of the People did? Most of the old-timers perhaps, but none of the youth.

She was suddenly stirred, then and there, wishing she might comprehend the words Preacher Yoder read from the Old German Biewel wanting to know what was being said at her beau's funeral, for pity's sake!

During the second sermon, she noticed Robert Schwartz sitting tall and stately, yet weeping silent tears that coursed down his solemn face. Strangely, he made no attempt to brush them away. Mary Ruth found this curious, never having seen a grown man shed tears in public, let alone at a large gathering. She felt compelled to glance his way every so often but only with her eyes, never moving her head.

Goodness knows what he must be feeling, she thought, but her heart was bound up with fond memories of dear Elias, as well as her own great sadness. How could she ever forget how he'd made it a point to put off joining church to run around a bit longer? What did this mean for his everlasting soul?

The People were admonished to live righteous lives, as

!> never knew when his or her "day of reckoning" might line, The second minister spoke on this subject for nearly an

111, urging young people to think carefully about joining pilith. "Do not put off the Holy Ordinance. It has the power

1 Ntntl your eternal fate."

I Mtiry Ruth felt a quiver run up her spine as the minister htlnued preaching. She wondered, just then, if what had pull en Elias was connected in any way to his decision to

I1 a|nine church membership "till another year," as he'd said. In no, she couldn't allow herself to be that superstitious.

I ' .lie did wonder if Elias had died in his sins. Since he was In luiprized at the time of the accident, were the ministers Lhi' Was her beloved standing outside the gates of Glory? I I luring the brief obituary reading in German by Preacher I-It, Mary Ruth considered the idea of wearing her black

i; ling garment for a full year, as if she were Elias's widow-

jL.li, She knew Mamma would not approve, but at this Luucnt of determined loyalty to her beau, she didn't rightly Ire what anyone thought. ;
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While the coffin was being moved outside so the People iiHild view the body, Leah noticed Dr. Schwartz and his wife, ..imine, walking toward their car. It seemed they were I. H, cly able to put one foot in front of the other, so down[i. -1' Ion they and their son Robert looked. She had recognized

11u.i from seeing his pictures several places in the Schwartz L,. r.o, as well as on the wall of the clinic waiting room.

Watching them cross the yard together, arm in arm, she

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felt a deep measure of sympathy and wondered if Dr. Schwartz would say something to her about this awful sad day come Friday, when she was scheduled to do some cleaning at the clinic. She wouldn't be so rude as to bring up the topic of Elias's death herself. Still, she wondered how the Schwartz family would manage to cope.

When she turned back toward the house, she noticed Mary Ruth hovering near the coffin, now situated on the front porch for the final viewing before burial. She wondered if her sister was out of her mind with grief, as sometimes hap' pened to couples if one or the other was taken early. Then she knew for sure Mary Ruth was suffering unspeakably, for her sister leaned down and touched Elias's face her last

chance to see him ever so close. But when she bent lower and

kissed him, Leah cried. She's saying farewell, she thought, wishing she, too, might have had that opportunity, though keenly aware how tragically different a situation this was.

Later, in the Graabhof, her father stood next to Smithy Peachey, black felt hat in his rough hands, as they glanced now and then at the coffin-shaped hole in the earth. Small grave markers were scattered here and there in unpredictable rows within a makeshift fence. For a moment the wire barrier

made her feel captive to the People, and she thought of Sadie and her endless shunning.

Leah's gaze drifted to the brethren the ministers and grown men, farmers all who set forth the unwritten guidelines for living. The Ordnung rules our very lives, she thought, missing her elder sister anew. The faces of the men looked pale in spite of their ruddy, sunburned complexions, she noticed, and women and girls dabbed handkerchiefs at their

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m\$, I'rying not to call attention to themselves. Yet how could R y Htcip their tears when the deacon's red-haired young Bh- once spirited and smiling lay lifeless in a simple wal- . kll box?

1 Four pallbearers used shovels to fill the grave once the cofm hud been lowered into the previously dug tomb by the use If It nig straps. Deacon Stoltzfus stood near his remaining sons,

11' ii jaws clenched, lower lips quivering uncontrollably; Ezra, |.|" ially, looked ashen faced. Elias's mother, grandmothers, In i is, and many sisters clustered together, some of them holdK|4 hands and crying, but none of them wept aloud. It was Lit the People's way to wail and mourn conspicuously, and Huh was glad for that. The sadness she felt for these dear fees spilled over into her own spirit, and she hung her head If in prayer.

I Once the grave was nearly filled, the pallbearers ceased Kclr shoveling and Preacher Yoder stood tall and read a lymn from the Ausbund. The People did not sing on this post sobering occasion, and every man and boy in attendance moved his blacky hat.

I Leah could scarcely wait for the sunset, hours from now,

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knt would bring an end to this heart-wrenching day. The prettlling gloom triggered the familiar helpless feeling she had Iften wrestled with in the black of night as she lay quiet as leut'h itself, wishing for sleep to come and rescue her from her liemories of Jonas. Of course, there was far less of that these lays than before she and Smithy Gid had begun spending Itiie together. If things went as she assumed they might, she bid the smithy's son would be husband and wife come next rear; she felt sure Gid was looking toward that end. As for

herself, she understood fully why her father had been adamant about Gid being a "wonderful-gut young man," not to mention his first choice as a husband for her. What was to fear?

Hannah put her hand over her heart, taking short little breaths as the soil was mounded. The burial complete, she felt like she might break into a sob, and just then Mamma reached over and found her hand, holding it for the longest time. Listening intently, perhaps too much so, she was scarcely able to draw a breath as Preacher Yoder admonished the People, "Be ready when your time comes."

She could only hope that she would be ... if or when her number should be called. How can 1 or anyone be ready for thatday? she pondered, not knowing in the slightest.

She felt she should talk to Mamma about her worries.

After all, she'd heard her mother praying beside her bed several times typically in the late-night hours, when Mamma surely must have assumed her girls were fast asleep. Honestly it seemed maybe both Mamma and Aunt Lizzie knew more about the Good Lord than they were ever allowed to let on, and it was time for her to ask a few important questions. With Elias's funeral taking up much of this day, she hoped to find some time soon to talk quietly with Mamma before Thanksgiving. They wouldn't be observing the day as an all-out holiday the way the English did, nor with prayer and fasting as Plain folk in Ohio did. They were taught to be grateful for every day as it came, though they did gather as families around a bountiful feast table, especially because it was their season of weddings. Attending this funeral of her sister's

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It proved at such a normally joyous time was the most difficult thing Hannah had ever done.

The afternoon crept along ever so slowly for Mary Ruth, particularly during the shared meal. About three hundred ministers had returned to Deacon Stoltzfus's home, passing by (the location of the actual calamity

there on the road at the end of the long dirt lane. Mary Ruth had refused to look; she'd kept her head tilted back, eyes on the stark tree

I winches lining the way.

She observed Ezra sitting at the table with his younger brothers. His face was swollen, and the stern set of his jaw betrayed something of his pain, making her flinch. Their cus-

I1 >m of eating a meal with the family of the deceased created :i strong sense of comfort and belonging for all of them, to be sure, yet she was painfully aware of the hole in the very middle of her heart. Elias had brought energy and excitement into her life. His kjten attention had given her even more reason to spring out of bed each morning and, if she were truthful with herself, was equal to her pleasure in book learning.

But now . . . what was she to do? She'd completely missed joining church with Hannah this year, deciding to put it off because she and Elias wanted to enjoy rumschprunge longer. Much longer, truth be known. Now it surely seemed as if Hannah and Ezra were the wiser.

Mary Ruth felt herself sinking into a gray despair such-as she had never known.

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-Lvejected and in urgent need of prayer, Robert left his father's house and drove to Quarryville for Wednesday prayer meeting the night following Elias's funeral. At the church, he prayed silently before the service began, pouring out his great woe to God. When he raised his head, anticipating the beginning of the meeting, he was aware of a number of Amish youth gathered there serious, distraught young people more than likely searching for consolation on the heels of the startling death of Elias. Yet their attendance was highly unusual, to be sure.

Following the singing of hymns, the pastor invited those with a testimony of grace to stand and "give a witness." One church member after another praised the Lord publicly, expressing the ways they believed God was at work in their hearts.

When a short lull ensued, Robert felt compelled to stand. Turning to face the people, he directed his solemn remarks primarily to the Amish youth. He began by sharing his anguish and then faltered. "I humbly beg . . . your

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l> iryiveness ... for having been the driver of the car last Sun>l.iy night. I pray you might find it in your hearts all of you line to forgive me for accidentally killing your own Elias ' iiollzfus." Shuddering as he spoke, he was aware of sniffing .iiul then a single sob. Unable to go on, he sat down, fighting kirk tears. His feelings of guilt over not having been charged wii h involuntary manslaughter or even a lesser charge continued to preoccupy his thoughts, although Reverend Longeni'cker had kindly pointed out when he had met with him privately before the service that Robert's guilt was unfounded. Nevertheless, the minister's words had not lessened the fact Kohert sincerely wished the Stoltzfus family had not let him oil scot-free.

When the minister stood behind the pulpit and began to pray, not a sound was heard except his earnest voice. "Our l;; if her in heaven, we come this night, carrying our burdens to you, O Lord. ..."

Mary Ruth volunteered quickly when Mamma asked for someone to take one of two batches of graham-cracker pudding over to the Peachey's the Thursday following Elias's luneral. Glad for an excuse to clear her head in the chilly air, she headed across the cornfield to the neighbors', low in spirit and dressed in the black garb of a mourner. Spying Adah's younger sister driving into the lane, she hurried to deliver the pudding to Miriam, then returned to help Dorcas unhitch the horse from the carriage. , ,...:' , ..":

"Are ya doin' all right, Mary Rufh?" asked Dorcas, who.

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reached for and squeezed her hand. .

"No . . . not so gut. Not at all, to be honest." .

"I'm ever so sorry for ya, truly I am." Dorcas let go of her hand and looked around like she wanted to say something private. "Have ya heard tell of the meeting last night in Quarryville?" she asked.

Mary Ruth had not.

Dorcas leaned closer and whispered now. "You could go 'n' see for yourself."

"How's that?"

" 'Cause there's another gathering tonight. I wish I could go again, but maybe you could. Might help ya some."

She urged Dorcas to tell her more and was surprised to hear the Englisher who'd hit and killed Elias had stood up in the meeting and made a sober apology. "Ever so odd it was, yet awful sad, too. I mean, we Amish just wouldn't think of holdin' a grudge against someone, yet there he was, talkin' like that. I tell ya it made us all cry. Every one of us."

Mary Ruth didn't bother to ask who all from Gobbler's Knob had gone, but she assumed from what Dorcas was saying that a sorrowing bunch of the youth had made the trip, seeking for something more than the Amish church could offer.

By Thanksgiving night, the very evening following Robert's apology, the Mennonite meetinghouse had filled to capacity simply by word of mouth

the local Amish grapevine was evidently lightning quick. Robert was surprised to see an even larger group of Old Order youth there to mourn

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f their friend Elias and hear of God's goodness and grace some

sfoi" I he first time, he was certain.

When Reverend Longenecker asked Robert to stand and ylvic his testimony, he did so with confidence. Later, when the

111 I nister gave the altar call, ten more Amish young people Clime forward to open their hearts to the Lord Jesus.

The first Saturday after Elias's death, Leah happened to overhear Mary Ruth squabbling with Dat out in the barn. "I Heed to take the family buggy tonight," she was insisting. "Where to?" Dat asked. , -, " ,,:; \ "....

"Quarryville." . :'. :.[. ; : .

"What's down there?" ...:-

"A gathering of young folk, is all." ,, ;

"Amish youth?" "No."

Dat drew in an audible breath. "I forbid you to go, then."

She wotikdered if nC) toO) might've heard all the talk the

reports of a throng of Amish young folk finding God at the

Metmonite church. "Well, I'm goin', anyway. One way or the

in her, I am!"

I "Just 'cause you're in the midst of rumschpringe . . . ifeesn't mean you should be back-talkin' your father!" Dat Hot back and rather loudly at that.

B "Well, if I'm old enough to run around with boys, Hlouldn't I be allowed to speak my mind 'bout some things?" I Leah felt terrible about standing there behind the wall of [the milk house, just off the main part of the barn. Yet she

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hardly knew how to make her presence known. And, truth be told, she wasn't sure she wanted to.

Mary Ruth didn't wait for Dat to give his answer; she simply ran out of the barn, crying as she went.

Leah scarcely knew what to do or say, though she hurt something fierce for both Dat and Mary Ruth. She also felt awkward to know how to get herself out of the milk house without Dat spotting her and wanting to know what the world she was doing sneaking around like that, listening in on a private conversation.

So she set about cleaning out the place once again, sweeping, then rinsing down the floor, stopping only when she happened to realize Dat had come in and was standing there staring at her, for who knows how long, waiting.

"Your sister's bent on havin' her own way, as you already know. Might be best, next time should there be a next time to cough or sneeze or something, Leah. Eavesdropping is out-and-out deceitful. Best be more respectful from this time forth."

Before she could speak, he turned and left, his work boots making powerful clumps against the ground. She was glad he'd left, in a way, because she would not have been able to defend herself, nor did she want to. Truth was, she felt nearly as innocent as the dogs King, Blackie, and Sassy who'd also been privy to Dat's wrath and Mary Ruth's foolhardy determination.

Put out with herself and, if she dared admit it, with Dat, too, Leah hurried to the house, her father nowhere in sight. She could hear Lydiann wailing her lungs out. "There, there," she said, running upstairs to rescue the napped-out tot. "Did

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lyou get left up here all by your lonesome? Did Mamma forget I'bout ya?"

I Such a thing was no way near the truth. Mamma had krobably gone to the outhouse. Hannah, meanwhile, was redding up her and Mary Ruth's bedroom, and Mary Ruth was itflit now running pell-mell down the lane, heading toward khe road. Just where she thought she was going was anybody's hucss. Leah was concerned about her grieving sister and Vished she might help in some way, do something to ease not bn ly the tension between Dat and Mary Ruth, but lessen the fcche in Mary Ruth's heart.

I "Let's go downstairs and see what Dawdi John's doin'," she Iwhispered to Lydiann. The tiny girl's eyes were wide and mright from awakening, though tears still glistened from her fcltention-getting cries. "Your grandfather hasn't seen you yet oday, so it's time we go over and visit, ain't so?" She continlied to coo as she carried her sister down the stairs, through lie front room, and over to the small attached home built l)iito the main house. The Dawdi Haus was a refuge for elderly l>r single rels&ives. For Leah, it was a comfort to be able to go ind sit with Mamma's father in his cozy front room, situated fclose enough to the cook stove in the tiny kitchen to keep it RviiriTi on even winter days. I "There, now." She set Lydiann down near Dawdi.

I "Did you come to see your oF Papa?" He reached for her

If

in id Lydiann held up her chubby arms.

"That-a girl," he said, putting her on his knee and bounc' Ing her gently. "Here's a horsey, a-trottin' and a-goin' to liiurket ... to market."

Her sister giggled, and Leah sat down across from them,

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watching with pleasure the joy Lydiann brought to Dawdi to all of them, for that matter. Soon, within another full month, there would be a baby sister or brother for them to hold and love . . . for Lydiann to grow up with, too.

How nice for all of us, 'specially Dawdi, she pondered, knowing he was slowing down more all the time, even though his health had greatly improved and his good days seemed to be very good.

She pondered whether to ask the question she was almost too curious about and how to ask it without causing a stir.

"Dawdi," she began, "I sometimes wonder ... I mean, what do you know 'bout my father?"

A serious look on his face, her grandfather replied, "Well, now, I've been workin' with your father all morning, Leah."

"Ach, you know what I mean, don'tcha?" she said.

He grew more somber. "I know you've had yourself some difficult times, getting adjusted to who the mother was that birthed you. Guess you feel like you have two mammas, ain't?"

"Sometimes, jah, I s'pose I do, though I can't say I think on that so much."

He tilted his head, gazing lovingly at Lydiann. As he did, Leah noticed his beard was thinner than she'd remembered

and whiter, too. "I wish it could stop right there. Wish you could be content with simply knowing 'bout your first mamma, Lizzie, and the woman who raised ya as her very own. Seems to me the rest of it, well, ain't all that important."

"Is there more to Lizzie's secret than she's willin' to share?

I don't know . . . she seems almost closed up about it."

Dawdi said softly, "Or is it something else altogether?"

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Her heart quickened and she sat there in the tiny room, not taking her eyes off Dawdi, hoping this might be the moment of revelation. "Do you know who my blood father

IN?"

He began to shake his head back and forth, slowly at first, .11 id then faster. Then he stopped abruptly and looked straight into her face . . . into her heart, too, it seemed. "I just never i bought you'd care a speck 'bout Lizzie's wildest days. Tis long I' irgotten . . . why dig up the shameful past?" He sighed loudly. "And 'tis hurtful, I must say, dear girl."

"For Lizzie, too?" , ;,

"Above all."

She considered this moment here with Dawdi and the soft I nibble of Lydiann as the moment when she felt she under lood something of her grandfather's love for herself and for I izzie. No matter which woman she claimed as her mother, I >;iwdi John Brenneman was her devoted grandfather, and nothing she could do or not do, know or not know, would i-liange that. Dawdi John was her flesh-and-blood grandfather lor always, ancfwhat he might know about her paternal origins no longer concerned her. She had asked and not received

[she information she desired.

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j She must simply wait for it to unfold before her, as surely

Bt would in time.

All day Mary Ruth waited for the tension to diminish between herself and Dat. At the noon meal she found the rain even harder to bear, as her father refused to ask her to

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pass the potatoes and gravy, even though they were clearly in front of her. Instead, he asked Hannah or Leah, making it seem as if she wasn't even present at the table.

Is this what it's like to be under the Bann? she thought.

She could not get used to the fact her own father did not come close to understanding her. Not only did he not understand or attempt to, she felt he was too harsh in his stance.

When dusk fell and she was still wishing to attend the nighttime church meeting, she asked Dat once again if she might borrow the family buggy. This, after supper dishes were cleared off the table, washed, and put away. She attempted to soften her voice and her approach, though she felt as if she might boil over with eagerness. "I'll take gut care, Dat, honest I will. If you'll just think 'bout letting me go ..."

"You should not be goin' alone after dark," Dat said.

"I could take Hannah, if you'll let her come along." She wondered momentarily how that would set, since Hannah was already a baptized church member.

"What's the urgency to go all that way?" he asked.

She refused to confess the rumors that Plain teenagers were getting religion. "I'll know better once I get there," she said best as she could muster. "Ach, just say I can go."

"Why not stay home, help your mamma bathe Lydiann and whatnot?" He wasn't budging.

"Please, Dat, won'tcha let me take the buggy and Hannah, too? We won't be gone long."

He turned beet red and pulled hard on his beard, making his lower lip protrude. "I'm not in favor of it; no way, no how." He stared at her, a frown crossing his brow. "But ... I s'pose 'tis better to have ya goin' in my family carriage than

123C-heC) a orifice . . .

Ill runnin' round with empty-headed boys all hours." I I Ie was referring to Elias's reckless buggy driving, no pllbt, before it got him killed. But she kept her mouth raised. Stunned that she was actually allowed to go, however Muctantly Dat had granted permission, she did not voice her Birtude. She took off running to the barn to get the horse Fill carriage hitched before he could change his mind.

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I Mary Ruth had unconsciously retained the image of tall bung Robert Schwartz from Elias's funeral, and when she saw im sitting on the men's side of the meetinghouse, her anger ks rekindled. Yet she was strangely conscious of his Imeanor, his compelling and kind, yet sad eyes. The minister Itroduced the young man as having a zealous testimony of lod's forgiveness and grace before asking him to rise and knd behind the pulpit. Already this was not at all like an Iniish preaching service.

I Beside her, H&nnah fidgeted, glancing at Mary Ruth, lobably wishing she hadn't come along now that they were tied into the seventh row on the left side with the other Binen. Surprisingly there were numerous youth present, a lot! many of them from their own church district. I When Robert read his

sermon text in English, she wouldn't know how this could possibly be. She had never known a language where the Scripture was read, and so freely, not in High German but in a language understandable to her present. And to think that this young man was the preacher tonight! ; >:

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"Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." He read the text from the epistle of James, chapter one. The doctor's son went on to say it was "high time for men and women to stand up and be counted for the Lord. We are called to do His work. But in order to make our bodies a living sacrifice to this high calling to be used of Him in the harvest fields of souls we must first present ourselves to the Most High God. Do not wait until it is too late to 'Give of your best to the Master. Give of the strength of your youth.'"

Mary Ruth intently listened to words and phrases from sections of the Bible she was completely unfamiliar with, and she hungered for more.

The engrafted word, which is able to save your souls . . .

The young preacher continued. "We all of us are lost, and we're inclined toward sin and the self ruin that follows.

From our birth onward, we yearn to be set free. We long for someone to take away our burden of sin and sadness. Our sinsick souls crave to be reborn, renewed."

She felt a strange tugging in her heart, something ever so new. She had been taught there was no assurance of salvation in this life. A person had to die first and then only on the Judgment Day could the words "Well done, thou

good and faithful servant," or "Depart from me, ye workers of iniquity" ever be spoken.

But evidently the Bible stated your soul could be saved here and now, while you were still alive and breathing; the verses just read confirmed this clearly.

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I She had thought of asking someone about the Scriptures HUtl IukI been read in High German at Elias's funeral. Now But she was here, inside a church building, of all things her Kit time ever she wished there was someone to help her IfnlrrNtand.

I "O Lord," the young speaker began to pray, "look into our Blul 1 erred hearts this night. Heal our brokenness and soothe IIIr Morrow. Let us understand fully the price you paid for our iviiClon, for each of us assembled here. You have redeemed

1 lor yourself with your precious blood spilled on Calvary's Ifpr, ami we are forever grateful. In Jesus' blessed name.Rint'ii."

I 11 wise gathered in this most reverent place began to sing I'll Iv a hymn Mary Ruth had never heard before, yet the I"" I', mgged at her heart. "Fightings and fears within, without. . . . O Lamb of God, I come, I come." The heartfelt liiu! no perfectly described this night and clinched her long|1H lor the Lord Jesus.

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All the way home, Mary Ruth chattered to Hannah, who

>i n't at all interested in discussing "forbidden Scriptures," as P> i i win put it. "But didn't the preacher's words stir up some-

ililiiM in you, sister . . . didn't they?"

"The young man speaking tonight killed Ezra's brother"

was Hannah's harsh response. "That's all I could think of,

but it's not my place to judge. I'm surprised it's me

involved in this and not you!"

Mary Ruth was suddenly outraged, though she'd felt the

same way as Hannah at Elias's funeral just days before. "I happen to

believe Elias died as a result of an accident, pure and simple. An accident. Why do you question the sovereignty of God?"

Hannah shook her head, glaring at her. "The young preacher-man slaughtered your beau with his automobile, that's what. Such modern things are of the world and are therefore a sin. That's how I see it. So should you."

Mary Ruth felt as if she might burst out crying again, reliving the shocking news of that horrid night, but she wouldn't give in to the grief she had endured. Besides, Hannah had redirected her thoughts with her comments. Truly, Elias's death was a woeful thing and the reason she would wear her long black cape dress and apron for as long as they felt right to her. Yet tonight she had stumbled onto something amazing: the renewal of life and the spirit. Hers. This renewal was something altogether foreign to her, yet she yearned for it like someone dying of thirst yearns for water.

"You saw him, Hannah. . . . Did Robert Schwartz look like a man who would intentionally run his automobile into a pony cart? Did he sound like it as he read the Word of God?"

"Ach, you talk nonsense," Hannah said. "What's got into you?"

She ignored her sister's barbed remark. "Best keep your thoughts to yourself, 'cause I have no intention of staying home tomorrow night. If the meetings continue on, I'm gonna be there."

"Best count me out. I made my vow to God and the Amish church. Ain't no room for Mennonite gatherings in my future."

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"I'll go with or without you, then," Mary Ruth said, sur-

I 'i Utnl ;ii Hannah's outburst; wasn't like her twin to give voice

i" Niuli frustration and so strongly, too. She, on the other

Ii.iiuI, Ii;kI been venting her thoughts far too often. "If I have

i" gt'l I lie Nolts to drive me in their car, I'm goin' back. I'm

upty in my soul, Hannah, ya hear? The Amish church can't

. tin tell me Elias is in heaven. I want to know God the way

11ip doelor's son described Him. I may not always have known

n , hui I've been lookin' for this my whole life."

That hushed Hannah up quicklike, for which Mary Ruth r. ever so glad; she'd had about all she could take. The hour r. nwful late, and she felt nearly too limp to attend to the

Yet such a hankering she had to know and hear more

"I i foil's Word. .,;...

/ will return tomorrow night, she promised herself. No

nuttier. ...:

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1 Vlary Ruth stood in the shadow of the springhouse, waiting for Dat to head to the barn. She knew he was indoors talking up a storm to Mamma, probably saying how the twins had come dragging in mighty late last night. Maybe, too, he was letting off steam about the many Gobbler's Knob young folk "out lookin' for the Lord God in all the wrong places."

She wouldn't put it past her father to say something like that. Then Mamma might speak up and say how she felt, or simply nod her head and remain quiet this time.

It certainly didn't matter to Mary Ruth whether or not Mamma voiced her opinion. Truth was, she felt strongly enough about what she'd heard at the church in Quarryville to convince her entirely. Scarcely could she wait to speak to Dat, who was just now hurrying out the back door and making a beeline for the barn.

She waited a bit, then took out after him, willing her feel to walk not run. Slow down, Mary Ruth . . . take your time.

Once inside the barn, she sought out her father, noting his disheveled appearance hair mussed and oily from a week

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Ml lutfd work. He pushed, his tattered black work hat onto his Ju'iitj) Securing it with dirty and callused hands.

She called to him and, getting his attention, hurried in hLM illrtviion. "I best be talkin' with you, Dat." Quickly she h'K'in t<' share those things she'd heard from the Mennonite pulplr niul had been pondering overnight.

An soi hi as her comments focused on the assurance of sal' V*itii>n, ;i change came over her father's countenance a hardenliiM in 11is eyes, a frown on his face.

"I have no time for such talk!" he replied.

She fought hard the urge to holler out her aggravation in

11.. .1 illness of the barn. "Don't you see, there are Scriptures ! lu-lp us get to heaven? We can know we're goin' there! 'vr hi'cn kept in the dark all these years."

I h\ was just as adamant. "It smacks of pride for a person hi ..iy they've received salvation. You know the story of crealinn hy heart, Mary Ruth. The all-powerful, all-knowing God I i.liio/ied all things, both on the earth and in the heavens. I I i -i the evil one, Satan, was cast out of heaven for the ultiiiii.n! sin of pricte, and tempted Eve into thinking she could U 'I -i tit than God,' which is exactly what you're savin' when S'hi i him salvation."

I Ine Dat paused a moment, then went on. "Must I take V"H i" the bishop himself to discuss these things you know,iIm „dy?"

'- hi- decided then and there, Bishop Bontrager ought to be i"U the truth of the Holy Scriptures. After all, he was the

In' I authority and responsible under God for the Gobbler's i !! 'I i church district. "That's a wonderful-gut idea," she shot

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back. "We could open the Bible to the selfsame verses ||
preached on last night." -\\

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Dat's eyebrows came together in a dark ripple. "Then you

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knew all along where you were headed to the Mennonites."

He shook his head in disgust. "You cause strife in our midst,
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daughter."

She felt the hot stain of embarrassment on her cheeks, yet
she would not submit; she had absolutely nothing to lose. She
must fight for what she believed the Lord God had allowed ^
her to hear and witness in a strange church, because in the jj
span of a single night, her world had been altered more than Jj
she could say. 11

As much as she respected her Amish upbringing, and as ii
much as she missed her dear Elias, Mary Ruth now realized M
she must follow her heart to higher education, that one thing m
the Lord had implanted deep within her. I

"Dat, I don't mean to cause trouble. I've waited a full year and more. Why should I wait any longer to go to high school? I'm old enough to do as I please; anybody knows I

'∴. that." m

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"We had this all worked out, Mary Ruth. You agreed to stay home with your mamma and help . . . till you married, j\ whenever that time came." Dat's voice sounded nearly breath' i\ less. 1

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"But all that's changed . . . don't you see? Everything's dif- |] ferent now." j:

"Just 'cause Elias died?" 4

"Since my beau was . . . taken from me." Mary Ruth was jj angry and sorrowful all mixed up together. "Nobody knows Jj this, but Elias and I were go in' to be wed . . . one day." f jj':

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I "I'm nwlul sorry 'bout his death, daughter. Truly, I am." I "Oli, l);ir!" she sobbed. "If you mean it, then won'tcha Ifc'M1 ini' your blessing to get my education? This is the only Illiiny 1 iviilly want now in life."

I Ah >nf,' silence ensued. Sadly she knew pursuing the dream pYuuld eventually lead her away from her parents' church. Unknowingly she had been searching for something deeper II" i whole life ... for true wisdom. Losing Elias had uncovered in> timptiness in her spirit, and the obvious lack on the part I i I'llghop Bontrager and the brethren to fill it. I When Dat did not respond to her fervent plea, she spoke liiiMih. This time with an even more fiery edge to her words. r'nit'Nsing or not, I'm goin' to get my high school diploma . . . Iff*) m K hi us 1 can get myself enrolled. Even if I have to do it by ItjuicNpondence or whatnot, I must follow God's bidding." I "I low on earth can ya know such a thing?" Dat asked. I "('m't explain it, really. All I know is the Almighty put

1)1 ilii-h- . . . my desire to teach young children." She paused, It i'lii.iiiplacing what she must say next. "And I want to read [hi 1.1 Mialy the Bijjle." I "Study, ya say?"

I "|;ih, and no wonder the Quarryville church has room Ijiilly in stand at the back. The place is packed, and you and Bdmnma . . . you should go and see for yourself. Hear the woti Is ol the Lord God preached in such a way as you've never tatvn."

^Hnlu- knew her father faithfully read Scripture, but he did ^^E |'iiu.se and ponder any of it or ask questions of anyone |Bn what he read. Usually he did so silently in High Kli'riiiiiiii, seven chapters at a time, and, when asked, he would

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read in Pennsylvania Dutch to the family. But at no time would he have admitted to formally studying the verses. That was thought to be haughty and high-minded . . . and far from the ways of the People.

No wonder Mamma had been opposed to the library books once hidden beneath Mary Ruth's bed. Was she worried Dat might discover Mary Ruth also desired to study the Holy Bible, perhaps in English? Begin poring over it the way she did every other book?

"Mamma reads the Bible for herself, even says some of the verses over and over again. I know she does." Mary Ruth said it too quickly, and she worried she may have mistakenly pulled her mother into the center of the storm.

"Ain't your concern a'tall." Dat turned away, removing his black hat and raising it ever so high off his head, as if preparing to shoo a fly, but there was no fly in sight. Downright mad he was, and she knew it.

Then, nearly as swiftly as he'd lost his temper, he somehow managed to regain it and pushed the hat back square on his mashed'down hair. He turned to face her. "I'm tellin' you this here minute, if you are so schtarrkeppich as to insist on your way to ignore my rightful authority as your father I'll have no choice but to go to the brethren about this matter."

"What can they do?" she retorted. "I'm not baptized."

"No . . . but Hannah is, and the two of you are bound by unbroken cords of blood and spirit." He was surely grasping at straws.

She felt put upon, as if she'd done something terribly wrong against her twin. Bound by unbroken cords . . . well, for

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pity's sake. Baptism was up to the individual, not a mandate of I lie People.

Dat shrugged, then walked away.

She could see it was no use trying to continue the heated debate; Dat's mind was made up. Now she would have to follow his wishes or suffer the consequences rumschprunge or not.

Still, she could not squelch the hankering to know more. She despised the feeling of having been kept from things that truly mattered essential truths found in the Holy Bible. After all, there must be some important reason why folk called it the Good Book. Mary Ruth didn't rightly know how she would get to Quarryville again, but one way or another she was going tonight. If she had to run down the road to the Nolts' place, she would.

Leah was out searching and calling for a wayward cow, up in the high meadow and clear back toward the woods on the north side. She couldn't help but think as she wandered the field that the cow was truly the smart one. The day was awful pretty, what with the skies as blue as one of her for-good dresses, and not a single cloud. Such late autumn days wouldn't stay nice like this much longer. It was highly unusual for the twenty-seventh of November to be this mild.

We're having us a fine Indian summer, she thought, tramping through the tall grass, wearing shoes for the first time that autumn on feet swollen from months of going barefoot.

At long last Leah located Rosie under a stand of trees, the

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boughs void of leaves now but still sturdy enough to provide a bit of shade. Munching away and minding her own business, the cow appeared to be content this far from the bank barn. "I'd say you went explorin' today, didn'tcha?" Leah slapped Rosie's hindquarters playfully. "Let's go on home now."

On the walk back, Leah spoke coaxingly to King and Blackie, who ran together more often now that the pup, Sassy, had come to live with them. Three's an odd partnership, Mamma liked to say. Leah was seeing it firsthand, for the younger pup preferred to stay close to home, begging for handouts at the back door. It was easy to see Mamma was spoiling that one.

"When will the first snow fly?" She reached down, petting King and Blackie both as they went. Then she had to direct the cow away from the temptation of going belly deep in a clear creek nearby. "Can you sniff the air and forecast a change in weather like Aunt Lizzie does?"

She had to smile. Her blood mother, bless her heart, was the sweetest, dearest Aendi she had, and there were plenty on both sides of the family. Leah was looking forward to seeing more of Mamma and Lizzie's sisters again over in Hickory Hollow come next Saturday. It had been a good long time since Dat had actually consented to take the family to the old Brenneman homestead, where Dawdi John and Mammi gone to heaven had lived and raised their brood of children. This visit they planned to see Aunt Becky and Uncle Noah Brenneman, the man Dat had often tried to avoid at all costs, before the truth of Lizzie's past had finally come to Leah's ears.

"Nearly time for milkin'," Leah said, nearing the corral and following Rosie into the barn. She was eager for winter

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lyenilu-r, because once the windmill started clanging its tinny ling ;ind strong gusts of cold air swept up from the distant Kills, piling snow up high against the north side of the barn, iDut: wouldn't need her so much outdoors. No, Dat was awful Kind that way, and he was beginning to be even more considrate these days, now that he suspected Leah was seriously eeiug Gid.

I i'unny how that is, she thought, preparing the cows for (milking. When Dat's happy, everybody else is bound to be, too.(She wondered how things would go when the smithy's son (asked Dat for her hand. That day couldn't be too far off, and line felt almost breathless with excitement. She looked forIwnrd to long winter days of quilting, when she would once lidjain be

included in the community of women folk, something she enjoyed more than ever.

Is it because I am soon to become a wife? She didn't quite (know why her attitude toward work frolics was changing. (Scarcely could she wait to see what pattern and colors would be used in sewing the next quilt. This one, she knew, was I meant to be given to Deacon Stoltzfus's wife for her birthday, I Come Christmas. Everyone knew the reason behind the gesture was to bring a bit of cheer to the grieving woman. She I had looked awful peaked last Sunday at Preaching service, Eli recalled, her heart going out not only to Elias's mother I but to the whole family.

When Dat came shuffling into the barn, she greeted him. ["Just in time for milkin'," she said. But he surprised her by I heading right back outside without saying a word. I Somethings awful wrong, she thought, hoping it wasn't I more bickering with Mary Ruth. Still, she couldn't help

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wondering, because just before she'd gone looking for missing Rosie, Hannah had dashed through the barnyard, running hard down the lane after Mary Ruth, hollering, "Come back, sister. Won'tcha please come back?"

She pressed the cow's teat, milking by hand as she always did, and was nearly startled at the strength of the first spritz of creamy milk. "Good girl, Rosie," she said softly. "Glad someone's content round here." ,, , ; :: ;

Robert Schwartz held the obituary in his hands a paper memorial. He had cut out the small square of newsprint last Wednesday, tucking it in his personal possessions to take back to college. Something tangible to forever remind him . . .

He sat in the dark, in the formal front room, where he could contemplate the events of the last week without interruption. Life-altering days when opinions and perceptions had radically changed. How could one twenty-four-hour period be so drastically different from the next?

He replayed the entire week from Sunday to Sunday in his head. Visions of Elias's body sprawled pitifully out on the road . . . recollections too painful to ponder. Elias's mother at the funeral, how she looked as if her knees might give out, leaving her too weak to stand. The Deacon Stoltzfus, as he had been reintroduced to Robert prior to the service, had worn a solemn face, sitting erect with his sons, the weight of the world on his back. Robert had recognized the invisible burden, because he, too, carried one linked to all the misery of the day. : /

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Robert had heard the sniffing of one young woman in particular. She was surely not more than a teenager, likely Elias's own age, perhaps younger. A girl with a look-alike sister, possibly a twin both with strawberry blond hair had struggled through the endless funeral service, even leaning, at one point, on the shoulder of the other girl. Elias's sweetheart, he had surmised at the time, for no other woman, apart from the one who had appeared to be as distraught. Robert had noticed the same girl and her sister at the Mt. Pleasant church. On the final night of meetings, just last evening, he had spoken with her briefly as she made her way out the door with Dan and Dottie Nolt and their son. Dan had introduced her to him as "Elias's former bride-to-be, who came along with us tonight." He wanted to say how very sorry he was, say the accident was the worst thing that had ever happened to him, but any words of sympathy he might have offered remained locked behind his lips. He could not recall the few words he'd said in response to Dan's brief introduction, but he remembered offering his hand and shaking hers quite gently, lest it break, requesting forgiveness with his eyes. Thinking back, he suddenly realized there would have

been no spontaneous meetings at all no rejoicing of the heavenly hosts when dozens of grieving, repentant Amish young people came to the Lord Jesus had he driven home his Sunday night without incident. "Things happen for a reason," one of his professors often stated with conviction. There/fore the sovereignty of God can be wholly trusted. You can throw your life on His mercy. ..."

Contemplating these things in the quietude, he was startled when his father wandered into the darkened room

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and sat on the leather chair, put his feet up with a sigh, and merely sat silently for more than a full minute. Robert felt obliged to be the first to speak, and he began by simply saying he wondered if the whole village of Gobbler's Knob hadn't turned out for the funeral of Elias Stoltzfus ... as well as the revival meetings that followed.

His father frowned disapprovingly, changing the subject to the weather. Not to be daunted, Robert rose and offered to pour some freshly brewed coffee. To this his father agreed. Robert hurried from the parlor, toward the kitchen, glad for some common ground, inconsequential as it was.

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Ida, now at the end of her eighth month of pregnancy, had not slept soundly for three nights straight. She shared this in passing with Leah, who had come in from the barn. "Catch your breath a bit, dear," she said. "And I will, too."

Leah settled down nearest the window with a cup of tea. "Soon we'll be using the one-horse sleigh to get to and from I'-reaching and market and all."

Ida sighed, glad for this rare quiet moment. "And we'll M>on have us a fother sweet babe to hold and warm us in the midst of our winter. I'm ever so eager. Can't help but thinkin' I his one might be Abram's first son."

"Oh, Mamma, really?"

She didn't want to make too much of it, Leah having been Dat's longtime sidekick for these many years. But if she were forthright, she'd have to

admit this baby was mighty different from his sisters. He kicked harder and poked deep into her ribs at times. He jumped and leaped and ran in place all night long, chasing sleep away. "What shall we name him if he's to be a boy?" <

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"Well, the name Abram does come to mind." Leah smiled broadly.

Ida had thought of that, too. "Well, now, 'tween you and me, I think there's room for only one Abram under this roof." She paused momentarily before continuing. "What would ya think if we named the baby Abe?"

"It sounds similar to Abram, for sure. Like a wee chip off the old block." Leah glanced up at the ceiling like she was thinking it through. When her gaze drifted back down, she offered another smile. "I think Abe's a right fine name. So why not see what Dat says to it?"

"Jah, Abram might enjoy namin' his boy." She went and poured herself some hot tea, stirring two teaspoons of honey into the steaming brew. Ida knew Leah was right. It was fitting to include Abram in all the excitement of a new little one. He'd gotten somewhat lost in the shuffle with the previous births, except for the day Leah came into the world.

She sipped her tea and recalled the autumn day, suddenly feeling compelled to tell Lizzie's first and only child the events surrounding the day of her birth. Rather impulsively, she began. "I understand from Abram you're quite curious 'bout your birthday your very first one, that is."

Leah's hazel-gold eyes brightened instantly. "Jah, Mamma, what can you tell me?"

"Only as much as I know," she said. "That October day was a busy one, what with potato diggin' in full swing. As I recall, the sun was warm and the skies were clear, although we'd had the very first frost of the season quite heavy, in fact. That morning I thought of all the weeds blackened by the killing frost, not one bit sad 'bout that. But . . . the flow-

fl'a, well, 1 was awful sorry to see their perty heads all wiltedi'v I'rnk'lil.

"Lizzie and I had awakened quite early. She'd come down thiin her log house to eat breakfast with us here, and after a lill we decided to make some apple dumplings, then redd up lilt4 kitchen.

"Several hours after I'd gone to help Cousin Fannie with Jirr full housecleaning, Lizzie's labor began. There was no way ft ii Ahram to get word to Grasshopper Level 'bout Lizzie witiv uiil lenving her alone, and she was fairly terrified, puttin' it |niklly. He hollered for the smithy and Miriam, but the PeachCV were out diggin' potatoes clear on the other side of their hum. So poor Abram, if he wasn't beside himself, wonderin' what the world to do.

"Then things began to happen awful fast, and there was h" lime to call for the Amish midwife, not the doctor, neither iHie, By the time I arrived home, late in the afternoon, you

11.u I already made your entrance into the world."

Stopping to catch her breath, Ida felt again some of the durprtse and excitement of that day. She drank a little more ol her tea. "Abram was the one who came to our Lizzie's resnio, bless his heart, and helped with your birth. He delivered his little niece you and we raised you as our own second i Li lighter. And, 'course, you know all the rest." She felt she iiiii^ht cry now as she remembered Abram's account of the i.prcial day.

"Dat, you see, was the first to hold you and speak softly to you 'welcome home,' he said and kiss your little head,

11 >vtired with the softest brown peach fuzz. Oh, how Abram Inved you, Leah. Right from the start he did. Honestly, I

believe he fixed his gaze on you like no other man might have, maybe 'cause your own birth father was nowhere to be found ... or, far as we knew, even known." She reached over and covered Leah's hand with her own.

Leah was still now, eyes wide. "Oh, Mamma, no wonder Dat took me under his fatherly wing. No wonder. . ."

"Jah, 'tis for certain. And not only that, but Dat had it in his head that he'd spared your life back when, after Lizzie first knew she was carrying you, which was prob'ly true, too. It was during that time your outspoken uncle Noah was bent on sending Lizzie away to end her pregnancy."

Leah clasped Ida's hand. "Mamma, why is it Dat has never wanted to talk 'bout my birth to me?"

She'd wondered if Leah might press further. "I daresay he may be embarrassed, really, recounting all the day entailed, ya know. . . ."

"I just thought there was more to it, that's all."

She shook her head. "You now know all I know, Leah. If it's your first father you're thinkin' of, well, I don't know a stitch more than I've already said."

Leah glanced out the window and Ida slipped her hand away. "You mustn't ever think you weren't longed for or dearly wanted by Lizzie . . . and Dat and me. Just 'cause, well, you know "

"Because Lizzie didn't have a husband? Is that what you mean?"

Neither of them spoke for a time. The warmth from the wood stove encircled them like a sheer prayer veiling as both women brought their teacups to their lips. ,

Ida set her cup down and leaned on the table, studying

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ILphli. "I*-l 'ike you to know something," she said at last. "You MOIuIm1 into the world, the moment you did . . . well, it turned HRy wnyward sister round right quick . . . away from the lure of I Worldly things. She had a change of heart even while she was litxpccling you. You gave her purpose to live a holy and Ilipilyhl life. She nursed and tended to you with plenty of I help from me and began to seek after the Lord God and His t > ivs," Here she couldn't help but sigh, remembering. "Lizzie } I nine nearly childlike in her faith. Truly, the grace of God ju.i.; upon her. She wanted to learn how to pray . . . and I I t.iiiu[ht her, just as Abram's mother had taught me long ago." I "So Lizzie wasn't content with the memorized prayers of

11,i-People?"

"She had a yearning to share from her heart is the best

wuy I can explain it. She wanted to learn to listen more to

11 it* Lord, as well."

| Leah's eyes widened at that. "Ach, Mamma, whatever doI , '11 mean?"

j She wondered how to describe the deep longing in both j I hi1 heart and lizzie's. "I s'pose at one time or 'nother, most : ill of us yearn after the Lord Jesus in a way that may be diff! nil" to understand." She hoped her comments might whet

I i-.ih's appetite to walk with the Lord God heavenly Father in i .imilar manner.

"I promised, at the time of my baptism, to uphold the

I lichnung." Leah fiddled with the oilcloth on the table before

Koing on. "You're not sayin' you go beyond what the brethren

I each at Preaching service in the prayers you speak of ... are

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"To honor the unwritten code of behavior amongst the

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People is all well and good, but it's equally important to obey God's Word, the Holy Bible."

Leah looked up just then, catching Ida's eye. "Aunt Lizzie taught me to talk to God from my heart, as she likes to say. After Jonas and I ... after we didn't end up getting married, when I was ever so brokenhearted, Lizzie helped pick up the pieces of my life by showing me the way to open up my spirit to the Holy One."

"I pleaded with her to do so," Ida admitted. "I felt this was something you and she could share mother and daughter, ya know."

Leah got up abruptly and came around the table. She sat next to her and leaned her head on Ida's shoulder. "Oh, Mamma, I don't know what I ever did to deserve two such loving women in my life. You and Lizzie . . ." She brushed away her tears. "I'm mighty grateful . . . and I hope ya know."

Drawn anew to Leah, she patted her girl's face. "The way I look at it, God must've loved Lizzie and me a lot to give you to both of us. Such a dear one you are."

At this Leah straightened and reached around her and gave a gentle squeeze. "I'm all the better for it, Mamma."

"All three of us are," Ida declared, getting up to warm her tea.

"In case you're wonderin', it makes no difference when it is that I find out who was my first father. I've decided to be patient in this and simply wait till Lizzie's ready to share with me . . . and not before."

You may have to wait forever on that, Ida thought but did not voice it.'

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I I cnh hurried to the cellar to help Mamma run the clothes
hiuuKh the wringer between Monday morning milking and
ffitkliisl. Hannah and Mary Ruth were already working in
Wkv kitchen, and Leah was glad for that. She could stay put
m h Mamma, aware of an extra-special closeness on this
li<" nili(j; of a new day, wanting to continue the conversation
Mr hi lust night.

"Why don't the ministers teach us to pray the way you
HIul Aunt Lizzie do?" Leah asked when it appeared they might
ii alone for a while longer.

I Mamma glanced toward the stairs. "'Tis best you keep
III11 li things to yourself."

I "Why's that?" She felt strangely intrigued, as if sharing
CUin'thing forbidden.

I "The brethren need not know of this." Mamma looked a
K

pit worried now. "There are different ways of lookin' at things,

Jill us I'm concerned. If a body wants to speak directly from the heart to the
Almighty not use the rote prayers then Iwho's to stop him or her?" She

nodded her head. "This happens to be one of those big issues that, sad to say, is downright lfl|4gling. Divisive, even, amongst the People." I "Hinnerlich?"

I "Oh my, ever so troublesome, jah."

I She wondered what other things Mamma might be refer-

I Hi IK to; the not knowing caused even more of an urge to ques-

mn. Still, she was obedient and held her peace, trusting God

to bring things to light in His own timing and way. > ., ..

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When lunch had been cleared away, Mamma sent Leah over to Miriam Peachey's with a large casserole of Washday Dinner, consisting of a hearty layer of onions, an ample coating of sliced new potatoes, tomato juice, and sausages.

"Mamma heard you were under the weather," Leah said, handing the meal to the smithy's wife, her someday motherin-law, Lord willing.

Miriam's face warmed with the gesture as she accepted the tasty offering with a smile and a joyful "Denki!" then asked, "Tell me, how's your mamma now?"

"Oh, she has her energy back and is doin' all her regular work and keepin' up with Lydiann, too," Leah assured her.

Miriam nodded her head and thanked Leah once more.

"I'll return the favor next week."

"No need to, really. Mamma's feelin' wonderful-gut. Has some trouble sleepin' at night but that's all." Leah turned to go, noticing Gid in his father's blacksmith shop, running the blower, stirring up the coals to make the forge hotter. She wouldn't bother him by going over to say a quick hello when it was obvious how occupied he was just now.

Returning home, she found herself imagining how busy Smithy Gid would be as her husband, managing his blacksmithing obligation to his father, as well as his work with Dat, which would take Gid back and forth between the Peachey and Ebersol farms. Not to mention his own work hauling and splitting wood for the cook stove and mowing and keeping things tidy outdoors, wherever he and she might end up living. She wondered if Aunt Lizzie might possibly move down

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m\ rh hnwili Haus to care for Dawdi John at some point, wklnu il possible for Leah and Gid to live as newlyweds in Hit1 till k' log house half in and half out of the woods. No one ^t'viT suggested such a thing, but she smiled at the idea, ^HdMK how much fun it would be to get her pretty things HPfrnin her hope chest, making a home at last for herself iin<l Old . . . and, eventually, their children. I She wondered if Lizzie had ever stopped to think about

111' i nwn future, back when she was Leah's age. Was she at all id' me when she was young? Did she think some of the same |i'< lights as \ do now? She tried to imagine Lizzie Brenneman jf milering outside as a young girl, talking quietlike to a favorin- ilo|j; like Leah often did to companionable King or lit inking up at the black night sky, speckled with bright stars, Ml It I wishing she could count them, so many there were. L)usl who will I be? Leah wondered. In the future, will I be Hfj/Kv! with the choices I make now? Who will 1 become in the H|| of the Lord, and will He be pleased with me?

Nobody knew it, but the night Leroy Stoltzfus had come

Inio I he kitchen to tell the news of Elias's accident, Mary
I'll i had felt her heart turn nearly hard as a stone. She could
I lively hear what Leroy was saying only the words Elias died
I 'im;/if had broken through.

11 was as if she had willingly stopped up her own ears I \$n ii nohow. She
didn't know for sure if the tuckered-out feeling Hp had just now was a
delayed reaction to the funeral, this H|ng the eighth day since the shocking
news had come. She

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felt heavy inside as she headed upstairs and sat on her side of the bed, on
top of the colorful handmade quilt made by Mamma and Mammi Ebersol
years before.

She ought not to have been surprised when, nearly thirty minutes later, Leah
tiptoed near, settled on the floor near the bed, and leaned her head against
the mattress, her hand resting on Mary Ruth's. "You can cry for Elias all ya
want, but I won't have you up here cryin' alone."

Tears continued to seep out of the corners of her eyes, spilling down the
bridge of her nose. "Oh, I miss him so ... I just can't say how awful much."

"Mary Ruth, honey ... I believe I understand," Leah replied.

She knows 'cause she lost Jonas . . . just not to death, thought Mary Ruth, at
least glad of the latter for poor Leah. "But I can't begin to know how you
must've felt, Leah . . . you-know-who doin' what she did."

They fell quiet, the two of them there together, both acquainted with similar
sorrow.

When Mary Ruth got the strength to speak again, it was a whisper. "Would you help me talk to Dat 'bout getting my education? He's ever so fired up these days."

A flicker of a frown creased Leah's brow. "Well, I don't know."

"Please, sister? See if you can gain some ground for me."

Leah sighed. "All right, I'll do whatever I can."

"You'll go and speak to him, then?" She wanted to get up, she felt that much encouraged, but she sat there without moving, still exhausted. :

"I'll do what I'm able." This was Leah's promise to her.

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I " That's ever so gut and I'm grateful." She gripped Leah's

In i<l "I don't like shouting matches," she declared. "Not one

in. Mr."

I " I then why do it?" came the quick reply. "Dat wants only

Jimi '* best for you."

I "I d'pose I'm too quick to say what I'm thinkin' is all. You

JOW me everyone knows how much I like to talk. Gets me

in it water more than I can say; more than I should say. And Jtietlmes the talkin' gets mixed up with the thinkin', and u|'n when I have the most trouble."

I I ,cal\ smiled sweetly. "Seems to me you could do more kink In' and less, well . . . you know." I "I'll keep that in mind."

I In tins they both smiled. Mary Ruth felt more hopeful hi I cured for when Leah was near and she told her so. What Br did not say was that she had run off to Dottie Nolt, mad

,ill get out, and discovered another sympathetic ear down

I1 ii >ad. No, it was best Dat or anyone else not know she was [ill mg to the "enemy," so to speak, though the Nolts were ji< nicest, kindest Englishers she'd ever known, and she sin| i. ly liked them. Still, if Dat knew they'd invited Mary Ruth I > > ('ine live with them, well, he'd raise the barn roof forkin ;ind for certain. ./.; ,...

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.Leah was out helping Dat split wood the morning after her heart-to-heart with Mary Ruth when she got up the nerve to say something about her grieving sister's zeal for education. "I know you've already talked this out with Mary Ruth some time back, but she's more determined than ever to attend high school."

Dat avoided her gaze, raising his ax clear behind his head and back, then bringing it forward to meet the log. "She oughta know better than to put you up to this," he grumbled when he'd sliced through the piece of wood with a single blow.

"I just thought "

"How can you, Leah?" he interjected. "Why must you think your sister will benefit in any way from stubbornly lusting after the world?"

"She'll probably do it, anyway. Why not give her the go-ahead just as you allowed both of us girls to work outside the home?" she replied softly.

He leaned hard on the ax, the blade next to the soil. "If I

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|(liw iitlrnl public high school, she might end up like . . ." li ln|pcd short of uttering Sadie's name.

Leah had scarcely felt like speaking up in defense of somekg (the herself did not believe in, yet she'd dared to, know^H Mary Ruth's torment over wanting something she could i^hiivi!. Leah was stuck, it seemed, loving Mary Ruth and \ 11 it Ink to honor Dat and do the right thing.

lie locked at her, eyes blazing. "I say if you're to be Mary tiili'i mouthpiece, then tell her this for me. Tell her she is i I'tfi^er welcome in this house if she chooses to disobey her TI"

)h no, Dat . . . no. This was the worst thing for Mary "'ill, because surely now she would leave; she was just that i .I born. Without Elias alive to keep her linked to the People i" I I let" Amish roots, she would most certainly fly away to the

Lcnh tried tcteget Mamma to sit down and rest in her big In iliooin. She had asked Hannah to play with Lydiann for a wliilf, hoping to coax Mamma off her feet and into bed. Terrll il v distressed at the news of Mary Ruth packing her clothes, Minima began to weep.

"Maybe she won't like high school," Leah suggested, ybling it herself.

Hfc"No ... no ... no," sobbed Mamma. " 'Tis wrong, ever so ^BnK> To push her out of the nest too soon like this." ^Spooling awkward about hearing

Mamma voice her disapHfvnl of Dat's decision, Leah hovered near.
Mamma was

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standing in defiance, looking out the bedroom window. "Best talk to Dat 'bout all this," whispered Leah.

"I'll talk all right!" Mamma turned and suddenly fell into Leah's arms. "Oh, what's to become of us? First my eldestdaughter, now Mary Ruth."

"Preacher Yoder says all is not lost till it's truly too late. 'As long as there's breath there is hope,' he says, ya know."

"Life and hope, jah. I just don't want to see Mary Ruth sent away like this. We all love her so!" She began to cry again. "What'll dear Hannah do, bless her heart? They're close twins, for goodness' sake."

Leah felt like sobbing, too, but she needed to be stronger than poor Mamma. Wordlessly she helped her mother over to the bed to stretch out a bit, then closed the door and tiptoed down the stairs to the kitchen, where she would start supper soon. First, though, Leah must tend to sad Hannah, check on Lydiann . . . and pray fervently for God's grace and mercy to fill this too-empty house.

Leah, Lydiann, and Aunt Lizzie piled into the second seat of the buggy the Saturday of the planned visit to Hickory Hollow. Mamma and Dat sat up front. Hannah, having volunteered her companionship, stayed home with Dawdi John, who was suffering a head cold and a sore throat. Leah was fairly sure the real reason Hannah had stayed behind was to steal away to the Nolts' for a good long visit with Mary Ruth; that way Dat wouldn't have to know about it and neither

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Ihnilil Miiiiiinii, who was beginning to worry Leah and Lizzie

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I l/.lr had made a fuss about Mamma making the long trip i"l iy, Inii her pleas had fallen on deaf ears. "I don't need IHrnp't'iiin'," Mamma said in response to Lizzie's entreaty. '\$ HfNidcs that, Dat didn't look too kindly on Lizzie interferhe with I In- set plans for this brisk, yet sunny afternoon. "I'll i id Ida. You see to yourself," he snapped, startling Leah.

All during the ride to Hickory Hollow, Dat sat stiff and Blf, holding the reins. Leah felt awful sorry for Mamma and ^Ht'il she could be sitting next to her, patting her hand if ^H In', Dear, dear Mamma . . . two of her girls were gone ^H 11 ii1 house . . . and the Fold.

^H)| course, none of them knew for sure if Sadie had ever ^Hld acceptance into an Ohio church community, so Leah ^Htcil she ought not to jump to conclusions. Still, they all ^BrU'il Bishop Bontrager would have heard something if ^H| was a repentant member of a "high" church, one with ^H)iv relaxed discipline in short, just plain more worldly. ^H.imW pondered this while taking in the sky and trees, now ^H i il leaf and stark as could be against the wispy clouds and ^Hcly blue sky, hinting of gloomy gray days, blowing snow, ^Hti y winds. Soon heavy snows would put everything into ^H motion once again.

^H hc shivered suddenly, eager for Mamma's newborn babe, lowing full well the great joy an infant could offer a '< Miuk'd soul. In the eyes of her heart, though, she could not ii" i^liic ever holding her own baby, hard as she tried. "Oh, ! I mi 'II come, surely it will, once you and Smithy Gid are

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husband and wife," Aunt Lizzie had assured her the other day when she'd confided this.

Once I am a wife . . .

The words still seemed somewhat foreign to her, yet she knew her heart was ready to both give and receive love again. "Once you're married, you'll forget you ever loved Jonas," one quilter had cheekily whispered in her ear during a break for coffee and sticky buns.

Leah didn't see how she'd ever quite forget the relationship she'd had with Jonas, maybe because he had been her girlhood love. But, in due time, Mamma had recently insisted, Leah's injury of the heart would mend "a hundred percent."

When they neared Cattail Road, tired from traveling, Dal announced they were coming up on Hickory Hollow.

Leah liked the sound of the small place and wondered how it got its name. She knew what a hollow was a holler the People called it but just why was the nearly invisible dot on the map named Hickory? Was it because of the many hardwood trees growing nearby, most originating from the walnui family? She'd heard her father speak of a farmer there who made hickory rockers as a hobby. Dat had purchased several rocking chairs some years back from the older gentleman. Whatever the source of the name, Leah was eager to lay eyes on the well-forested landscape once again.

Once they arrived, Dat jumped out and hurried around the carriage to help Mamma down, seemingly more compassionate toward her than at the outset of the trip.¹⁵⁵if i c e '

Nun¹ for some good fellowship, Leah thought, breathing a jpvtal Ni[^]h at having safely reached their destination, as [^]J| Bt Dat's improved mood. They all could use a carefree Skull, what with Mary Ruth gone to live with Englishers. [^]Birlnis' the ride up, Aunt Lizzie had talked softly to Leah, H[^]iin ylad to cradle sleeping Lydiann in her arms. "Noah [^]mn/ky will be mighty glad to see us," Lizzie had said. HlLully Lydiann, I would think."

"How long since we've visited, ain't?" ' , . , Htlle had nodded. "We ought not to be so distanced from

Be .':

But immediately Cousins Peter and Fannie Mast came to H. Leah shook herself, not so much physically as mentally. H. did not allow herself to think about the Mast family. How she leaned down and kissed the tip of Lydiann's tiny nose. "Your little sister's eyes blinked open. "Look where we are. You slept nearly all the way, dear one." H. continued to hold Lydiann close for a moment, till the girl awakened. Then she rose and got down out of bed herself, still carrying her sister. "What a nice December day!" Lizzie commented as they brought Becky and Noah into their parlor, filling up the places for sitting in the small front room. H. in the kitchen served hot spiced cider to each of them, H. for Lydiann, who seemed glad to sit off away from the

at the small kitchen table, drinking a cup of chocolate Leah pulled out a chair to be near Lydiann, noticing B. and Mamma's sister-in-law, Becky, was moving slower, H. limping on occasion. Uncle Noah, with his long graying hair, was, too.

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Goodness, they look older than I thought they might. She wondered how long it would be before Dad and Mamma began to show their age and slow down. Uncle Noah was lots older than Lizzie, for sure, and a number of years ahead of Mamma, too. She observed Aunt Becky, who had seemed to be trying very hard not to stare at Mamma's swollen stomach.

She probably thinks Mamma shouldn't be out in public, thought Leah. After all, there were probably only three weeks left before they'd know if Abram's daughters would be welcoming a brother at long last. At least two of us will be on hand to help Mamma with the new one. Leah was thinking of Aunt Lizzie and herself; naturally Hannah and Lydiann would be somewhere

near the birthing room. Just then she wondered if Dat would ban Mary Ruth from the house even on the joyous day of Mamma's delivery.

Mamma's voice drew Leah back to the moment. "A new

baby will help keep my Mann and me young longer," she said right out. "Ain't so, Abram?"

Dat appeared sheepish now and said nothing.

Leah found his lack of response intriguing. "Well, now, that's the truth," she whispered playfully to Lydiann, reaching over to tickle her head as the toddler reached up and grabbed Leah's fingers with an unexpectedly strong grip.

"Schweschder . . . Lee ah," Lydiann surprised her by saying.

"Jah, that's right. I am your sister." She laughed softly. Wouldn't Mamma enjoy hearing about Lydiann's sweet words? She would be sure to tell her on the ride home to Gobbler's

Knob. , , , , ,-,

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I \lt.er sitting and talking about the weather and whatnot,

I > II us asking about both Hannah and Mary Ruth, Aunt

I'. I y brought out a small tray of crackers and several kinds

|| 11 H-oses, along with sliced apples. "Help yourself," she said,

pttrrlng about the room while balancing the tray in one

piul. Her wooden cane had made its appearance, but no one

Itl n word about it.

I [Inele Noah and Aunt Becky talked of their own friends
|tnl relatives, including one Ella Mae Zook. "The dear
miiiiiin's known for her mint tea and mighty lovin' heart,"
pun I Becky said. "She's even got herself a nickname."

I "Oh? What's that?" asked Mamma.

I "Some folk nowadays are callin' her the Wise Woman."

I I Jncle Noah grimaced and made a peculiar sound in the
I,. I of his throat. "What women don't go 'n' think up. . . ."
If ili thought she heard him mutter.

I Hut the real news from Hickory Hollow that day was
bout Sadie. "I h%ar Sadie's in the family way," Aunt Becky
Hid, grunting as she sat down.

I Mamma's face at once brightened and then instantly
IttKKod. Dat right away turned and stared hard at the window.
Leal) didn't know if he was struggling with the mention of his
If Ml horn's name or just what.

I She kept waiting for someone, anyone at all, to make a
Hininder that there was to be no mention of Sadie's name in
Iho midst of the Gobbler's Knob folk by Bishop Bontrager's
iti'roe and Dat's own wishes. Of course, the Bann did not

Include Hickory Hollow. r : V

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s m > n158 i . ' . "KJeaerty J^ e w i s " .

"When did ya hear?" Mamma managed to say. ,

"Just yesterday," Aunt Becky replied.

Right then it seemed Mamma and Becky Brenneman weir the only two in the room and communing on some cherished level.

"Who told ya?" Mamma asked, eyes wide. \ ,.: ,

"A cousin of a friend of Ella Mae's."

"Anything I can read for myself?" Mamma said, shocking Leah and evidently Aunt Lizzie, too, as Lizzie's hands flew Co her throat.

Aunt Becky shook her head. "No. Sorry, Ida." ::.

"Simple hearsay, then?"

"Either she's expecting a baby or she ain't," Aunt Becky replied, accompanied by a severe stare from Uncle Noah.

"No more!" Abram's head was bowed low, as if in prayer. Raising his face to them, he spoke again. "Best leave things be."

Glancing around the room at Dat and Mamma . . . and Aunt Lizzie, too, Leah saw pain mirrored on their faces. She felt the urge to speak up like Mary Ruth had been doing lately. Trembling, she had to will herself to remain silent and simply let the news of Sadie's first baby as a married woman sink into the hollows of her mind. Seeping slowly, surely inci > her splintered heart.

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' will nhout her washday routine the Monday after the I iiry I lollow visit, washing and hanging out clothes with

11 I nun Leah and Hannah, who took turns tending to I' mil throughout the morning hours. Ida refused to give in

* I. Ju^cd pain that wracked her middle. Surely this was

11. ii \< more than the result of too much brooding over Mary 'it moving out so awful sudden ... and the disquieting .ill' Sadie being with child and lo, at the selfsame time ill ii,(iinin. Sterne as when I was carrying Lydiann. What was it mi lht firstborn and herself? Was it the tie that binds, as H| so often referred to regarding mothers and daughters? wasn't wise to waste time wondering or worrying when Htul plenty to accomplish, just as she did every day but Hny. I ler "vacation" was nigh upon her, and that would H well and good once her baby arrived. She knew instincBy I his was to be her last child, just as Lizzie seemed to yN know when the weather was changing and rain or m was headed their way. For her own sake, she must not ill on either Sadie or Mary Ruth any longer, though it was

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mighty hard not to, especially when Mary Ruth showed up later that afternoon, long after the noon meal.

"I need to speak with you, Mamma," she said, her pretty face close to the screen door.

Ida hurried to the back door. What'll Abram say if hecatches her sneaking round here? She didn't care so much to be finding out.

"S'okay if I come in?" Mary Ruth was rutsching around, squirming to beat the band.

"Well, jah, all right," Ida said, not going all the way to the door, but motioning quickly to her.

They scampered like frightened cats upstairs to what was now Hannah's bedroom. "I had to see you," Mary Ruth said. "Even if it means I get a tongue-lashin' from Dat." Then she began to cry. "I want, more than anything, to share what's happened to me. I just never thought..."

"Now, now, dear girl," Ida said, cradling her. "I know your heart's taken over, that's all. We all struggle so at one time or 'nother."

"Then you do understand, Mamma? You don't hate me for what I must do?"

She shook her head. "Believe me, there is not a speck of anything but love in me for you and your sisters. Never doubt that, Mary Ruth."

"I hope Dat will allow me to visit sometimes, see the new baby, too. I'm not under the Bann, for pity's sake." Mary Ruth was sitting on the side of the bed where, till now, she'd always slept.

"That, you're not." Ida felt all in now, wondering whether or not to say what she wanted to. And then she did, surprising

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HjlNell, "This should never have happened you bein' sent HVtty, Vonr lather is of the old school, so to speak. And, well, Hlimin' I am, too, 'cause I'm married to him. He's mighty tei mined not to let his opinions slip to the side not 'bout HJuhci rducation nor spending time with Mennonites, neither* ."

H 11 icy looked at each other, basking in the love only a Hoihor and daughter can know. "So then, I'm bein' shunned v I Ml: alone?"

I "Sad to say, but seems so. No reason for it, really . . . you

Hi h'i baptized yet."

B

Mary Ruth hung her head. "I can't put aside my hopes and i* iiiis -and my newfound joy in the Lord Jesus." She began Hi -.liaiv the arrangement she had with Dan and Dottie Nolt.

11 icy want to help me with my studies; then next semester

t limning in January I'll start school at Paradise High

II i i 11u In ml.

"" These plans of yours, they've been simmerin' inside ya for vr so long." Ida knew this was true. Oh, the light of advenluic lilled evafy part of her talkative girl.

I "I'm ever so happy in one way . . . and awful sad in

iini her."

1 "Jah, I 'spect so, but there's nothin' to be done 'bout it,

lew, is there?" she said, feeling the tightness in her stomach Ruin.

I " 'Tis awful nice that I live within walkin' distance of you

fluid Dat." Mary Ruth's pretty blue eyes glistened and filled

Wilh tears once more. "I can only hope and pray Dat will see

the light of God's Word, that he'll understand I must follow

the Lord's call. Honestly, Mamma, I've found such life at my

new church. And, oh, the preaching! I hesitate to say the things I feel . . . that I know without a scrap of doubt. I wish you could know this same peace and joy this overflowing love for everyone round me."

A tight throat kept her from acknowledging that she, too, fully understood and had long embraced this sacred hope had opened her heart wide to it long ago, though out of necessity keeping it secret.

At last she found her voice. "I have prayed this might come to you, dear one. For all my children, really. And now I see that it has. Oh, Mary Ruth!"

Mary Ruth's eyes, bright with tears, lit up again. "Then, are you sayin' you walk and talk with the Lord just as I do?"

Ida was eager to say she, too, was a believer and in every sense of the word saved set free from her sins. Openly she told Mary Ruth these things, sharing her belief that people can "stand up and be counted for the Lord" no matter where they find themselves. "Yet just 'cause I've opened my heart to God's truth and attempt to live it out day by day, I don't feel I must leave the community of the People behind. I want to be a shining light right here in Gobbler's Knob."

"Oh, Mamma, you're a beacon! You surely are." Mary Ruth gripped her hand and rose when Ida did.

"'Tis best to pray and not boast of this salvation, just as I do not. The Lord sees your yielded heart and mine. That's what matters most."

Mary Ruth nodded. "Does Dat know of this?"

"Your father is content with the Old Ways." That's all Ida had best be saying. She would not share everything she and Abram had discussed through the years; some of it would no

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Jil"iuh |ii> :is troubling to Mary Ruth as it was to her. It was i I Hiilfss to reveal too much, lest she discourage her daughu i'. boundless joy, profoundly registered on her lovely face.

I I lunnah didn't like the thought of winter setting in here

ll'i-lore too long; the cold and bleak season had always

i minded her of her own mortality. She found herself wonder-

i i what it had felt like for Elias to die so suddenly out on the

j i id, Had he endured excruciating pain? Was that the thing

I ill 11 killed a person . . . took a soul from this world to the

As (or winter, the season was good only for missing the nidi o(air-dried clothes on the wash line, the sun beating

I. 'vn on her back as she tended the roadside stand, the sound I Mrds the same songbirds Mamma loved. But the worst of

I was Mary Ruth leaving home in the month of Christmas,

i .ill sad things. And just as Mamma was close to her delivery

I tii , leaving o*dy Hannah and Leah to help with Lydiann

M ii I soon another baby sister or brother. Not much for tending

i" children, Hannah supposed she best get used to holding

I),iliics, what with Ezra Stoltzfus having dropped some strong

I mits about getting married sometime next year. Here lately,

iliough, she didn't know for sure where he stood on the

in,liter ... or where she did. He hadn't gone to the singing

I r.I night, hadn't let her know he wouldn't be there, either,

I1 id he hadn't contacted her to go riding with him next Satm day after dark. Most likely he was still taken up with Humming the loss of his brother. Understandably so.

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Still, something in the back of her mind wondered her about Ezra. He might need a lot more time to get back on his feet. She would wait till he felt more sociable again. But that wasn't her biggest worry.

She was far more concerned over her twin's peculiar cornments about their visit to the meetinghouse last week. Seemed mighty odd to hear Mary Ruth go on so about the Scripture readings. In the deep of Hannah's heart, she feared she and her sister might lose the closeness they'd always had growing up. Mary Ruth's passionate interest in "salvation through grace," as she put it, was the worst of it.

Curling her toes, she flinched at the thought. She ought not to have gone, for had she refused, Mary Ruth might never have gone herself. But she had succumbed to her twin's persuasion Mary Ruth ever so good at pleading, making things seem urgent and all. Hannah wished she'd stood her ground and stayed home. Of course, riding along to Quarryville meant she was on hand to assist Mary Ruth in case there was trouble with the carriage or the horse. Other than that, she had not enjoyed her experience at the strange gathering and had even felt guilty for being there. Her first, and hopefully last, breach of the Ordnung. Yet according to Mary Ruth, Dat had not put his foot down about their going. He'd even given a halfhearted blessing, though not knowing precisely where they were headed.

Quickly she set the table while a kettle of oyster stew simmered on the cook stove. She couldn't help but wonder how much longer Mamma would insist on leaving an empty spot where Sadie had always sat at the table, as if for someone deceased. Mary Ruth's place was empty, too, and not to be

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lillnl by another family member. The family had shrunk down hi near nothing the pain of it especially evident in Mnmma's eyes at mealtime. Wouldn't be long and Leah's pLiiv would also be vacant, once she married Smithy Gid, which she surely would do. Made no sense to be a maidel if a nice boy like Gideon Peachey was asking.

When Mary Ruth returned to her new home away from I mine, she felt nearly wrung out with the effort she'd put forth in steal in and out of the Ebersol Cottage. She could imagine I he fury in Dat if ever she was caught visiting Mamma or her sisters Aunt Lizzie, too.

For now she could put that worry behind her. She found I Lottie in the kitchen peeling yellow delicious apples for drying. Not eager to expend additional energy telling of her visit with Mamma, she asked if Carl was awake from his nap.

"If he isn't, he oughta be," Dottie said, her hair tied back in a ponytail that made her look younger than her years. "Why don't you go and wake him, if you'd like."

Mary Ruth* agreed. "I'll check and see if he's stirring. If he's awake, I'll keep him company for a bit."

Dottie nodded her consent. "He'll be glad to see you. I think he's becoming very attached."

He'll mistakenly think I'm his big sister before too long, she i bought, wondering if that was such a good thing, being that she didn't know how long she would be living here.

In Carl's nursery, she tiptoed to the pint-sized bed and was delighted to see the beautiful boy lying very still but smiling up at her with shining eyes. "Well, hullo, sweetie," she said, standing over him. "Do you want to play with Aunt Mary

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Ruth?" She smiled at the name she'd just assigned to herself.

"Ma-ry," he said, sitting up.

"That's right." She helped him escape from under the tucked-in sheet and blanket.

Together, they found the box of blocks and began to pile them up in a tower, only for Carl to take absolute glee in knocking them down with a swift sweep of his small hand.

Later she took him downstairs to Dottie, and while Carl sat in his high chair and fed himself pieces of orange and banana, Dottie began to tell of the "miracle that occurred when Dr. Henry Schwartz called with news of a baby boy."

Mary Ruth listened with eagerness, thankful for the obvious hand of the sovereign Lord on the Nolts' home, especially because they had longed for a child for a good long time before Dr. Schwartz's phone call had come. "God knows our hearts' cry our deepest desires" was all Mary Ruth was able to express for the lump in her throat.

Intuitively Gid recognized there was something downright gritty about early December that made him contemplate the future and prospects for having a family of his own. Fields had already turned brown and the mouth-watering apples had been picked a few rotten ones languished on the ground, and red fox, scavengers at twilight, came searching them out, devouring them in

quick chomps. Farmers were twiddling their thumbs following the corn harvest, looking ahead to the first farm sale of the season and finding excuses to gather in the barnyard, smoking pipe tobacco and chewing the fat, watch-

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|Imi' ttrn;ige boys play cornerball while waiting to bid on a |l! i? of farm equipment. Such happenings turned Gid's

|il- 'imliis to hearth and home, helped along by the scent of

|> Hiiiiiiinon pervading the kitchen as spicy pumpkin pies

I'll 'THivd supper after supper on the family table.

I

i: IVrhaps it was the nearness of Christmas that got him

11,mkinn, fis well. Complete with the annual program at the

' mom school, as well as the feast day, the Lord's birthday

I lii' most celebrated of all the holidays among the People,

in" dtiilit because it centered around kith and kin. Second

1 lii Istiruis, observed January 6 known as Epiphany by

, ,ll)e was also a time for families to gather and eat and play

i mies indoors and out. Seemed to him every young man his

ii had already married and was expecting a baby come next

i H n me r. Even Adah had settled down and married Leah's

in Min Sam in the past few weeks. Dorcas, his younger sister, imiiiIcI follow in Adah's footsteps in another year or so, most hi-fly.

As it was, Gid would have to go through another long and

"Id winter wiftiout a mate to warm him, since the wedding ' .iNtm was all but past. If Leah would have him, they would " .lit till next autumn to marry.

These were a few of the reasons he felt urged to ask Leah

111 be his wife while they rode together in his open carriage i hi a courting Saturday night. A wistful winter night of nights,

hilly enough for a woolen lap robe and his protective arm .111nind his dear girl.

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What with all Smithy Gid's talk of plans to help his uncle butcher hogs next week, Leah hardly felt much in a romantic mood, yet she listened intently as he talked of sharpening knives and scouring the enormous iron kettle,

"There'll be plenty of youngsters there," he told her, "takin" turns working the sausage grinder, ya know."

She knew all right from her own childhood days. Several times Dat had allowed both her and Sadie to miss school for

a butchering day, saying the event was "mighty educational," so she'd had ample experience in just what butchering a hog entailed. Everything from heating the water to scalding in the black kettle situated in the washhouse, to hanging the carcasses up and, later on, squaring the middlings and

trimming the hams and shoulders. Sadie had always said the stench was awful, and she didn't see why she had to watch when she much preferred to stay home with Mamma and cook or clean

or sew.

For Leah, the whole process was intriguing; she especially liked watching the men hoist up the large hams and shoul' ders, hanging them from the smokehouse crossbeams till they were completely cured and flavorful. Sometimes she'd chase after the younger girls, who collected the silken pigs' ears, and she giggled as the little boys took the tails for souvenirs of the day, pretending to fasten them to one Dawdi or another. Naturally for the women there was the fun of visiting and planning the next work frolic, while men talked of divvying up the meat, daydreaming, no doubt, about the tender sausages, tasty fried bacon, and home-cured baked-ham dinners their wives were sure to prepare.

Sadie said the best part was knowing the rendered lard

WuuM make for yummy doughnuts. Thinking of that, just hiiw, helped put Leah in a sweeter mood as Gid slowed the

I1 r'n unit. I

I "I've been thinkin' an awful lot." His tone was gentle as

|"iili| k\ "What would ya say 'bout becomin' my wife . . .

I Mini nt'xi year?"

I She'd honestly wondered if Gid might ask her tonight, but

I'I" luidn'f expected the important question to come on the

I

ll>' In dl' the hog-butcherin' talk. "We have been seein' a lot

In .ich other lately," she said.

I I le paused before continuing. "If you agree, we could
In 11 ry in late October next year. Be one of the first couples to
Ei i > ii ry during the wedding season."

I She was glad to be snug and warm under the lap robe, her
fill hkIn hidden from Gid's touch. That way his words and his
li'V did the talking, and his fingers couldn't cloud her think-
llnr, pulling pressure on her to say jah.

I "Would it be all right if we pray privately 'bout this? Ask
lilini^hty God to bless our union?"

I I le nodded, seemingly taken back a bit by the unexpected
July. "No need to hurry up with your answer," he was kind
Hbligh to say kind as he always had been for as long as
Hfe'd known him.

I It wasn't that she thought she needed time to consider
|l -id' as her husband-to-be, her betrothed. She honestly
I Idn't stop thinking about recent talks with Mamma, who
I led to want to speak to the Lord about most everything.
' " why not pray about her response to a possible mate?

I She assumed it best if she not say what was going through
Ilier mind. Clearly Gid was eager to move on now, discuss

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something else. She hoped he wasn't miffed. It was just that most couples who'd spent time courting this long would probably go walking in the woods somewhere, hand in hand, watch the moon from a high vantage point, then talk of their wedding day. She had no idea what she and Gid would talk about for the rest of the evening, now that she hadn't answered with a quick reply to his heartfelt question.

Settling back, she breathed in the fresh and crisp night air, glad Gid had simply begun to play his harmonica, sweet and low, surprising her with his unruffled repose. One tune after another, he played, seeming to her as a kind of loving serenade to a nervous sweetheart.

As he played, she thought back to all the years of his unwarranted faithfulness to her, years of uncertainty. Yet he'd responded with sheer loyalty, patiently waiting for her, and now he was asking her to be his wife, the mother of his children, making it possible for her to do that thing she was called to be and do. What Amish girl would refuse such a true and sincere gesture? Gid loved her immeasurably; she knew that beyond doubt.

A stir of affection for him welled up in her. When he stopped playing his cheerful tune, he clicked his cheek to send a signal to the horse to speed to a trot, and she brought her hand out into the cold air and touched his arm. "Gid, I don't need more time to think on your question."

He waited without speaking, eyes fixed on her.

"I would be ever so glad to be your wife." At that very moment she truly cherished her own words.

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11 nny l(inner blemishes had been evident on the rolling front Mil iiiul surrounding landscape of her father's house prior to

11 ii- I hick blanket of snow, the present winter scene was so l Miilhlakingly perfect that Leah found herself staring at the l I ormil ("ottage as she made the turn into the lane leading to i L> him 1 yard and back door.

She had stolen away in the predawn hour of Christmas I r dny to Grasshopper Level, choosing the faster of Dat's two lnytng horses.*A.t the Masts' orchard house, she dropped off > basket of goodies and fruit for little Jeremiah and the twins.

1 'iice there she got out of the carriage and made her way i h rough the ice and snow to the back stoop, depositing the I'i itflit basket with its red ribbon on the top step.

Duly Aunt Lizzie was aware of her "splendid idea," as .he'll put it, to spread cheer to relatives who'd shunned them Ii >i much too long. Not even Mamma knew of the furtive trip, M nl Leah hoped to keep it that way. Together, she and Lizzie I ml made a big batch of peanut-butter balls dipped in melted i liocolate, several dozen sand tarts, candied dates, and crystal

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stick candy at Lizzie's house yesterday. They'd had a laughing good time doing so. The best part of all was there were still plenty of sweets to go around, even having shared a considerable portion with Cousin Peter and Fannie's family.

Dat would more than likely devour a half dozen or more himself before the weekend was over. Unhitching the horse and buggy in the barnyard, she was glad to bring such happiness to his heart with the surprise. This, along with the fact she'd purposely let slip her intention to marry his choice of a mate, come next year.

Their neighbors down the road, including the Schwartzes and Nolts, had already taken axes to the dense woods and found attractive trees to chop down and set in a prominent place in their houses. Tonight, following Christmas Eve supper, most English families would carefully decorate fir or spruce with strung popcorn, colorful glass balls, bubbling lights, and tinsel strands.

The Ordnung did not allow for a tree to become an idol in the way of the Englishers. Instead, the People would happily celebrate the birthday of the Son of God tomorrow by attending Preaching service and sharing a common meal. Since Christmas fell on Sunday this year, much visiting would go on throughout the week. Folk would look into the faces of dear family members and friends, enjoying their precious nearness while sharing feasts at noon on Christmas Eve Saturday and sitting around the wood stove afterward to tell stories and recite poetry, giving and partaking of homemade candy, cookies, and other sweets. Dat would also read aloud certain passages from the Good Book to all who gathered

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^fi*. OfhiTs would wait till Monday to celebrate, being SunH? WUK church.

H I ciih had seen the Nolts' tree twinkling from their front ^lilnvvs in the two-story clapboard house where Mary Ruth H^ 11 veil and worked. They must have been eager to put it ^B liiwl ilecorate before Christmas Eve this year, maybe HtmiM' Mary Ruth was living there, and, too, because young Hill wi'ukl enjoy all the merriment.

H[V. lor the Schwartz family, Leah had observed the enor-

Hmi . nee I he doctor and his two sons dragged from the forest

* i lu- street just yesterday, when she dusted the furniture

11111 ^ .islu'il the floors for Lorraine. She was certainly glad not

li.nv been formally introduced to the younger Schwartz
 . I Very, whom Sadie had said such horrid things about
 ' i > 'Hi \ i Leah might have had to meet him if she'd stayed much
 i-'Hf:t'i ;ii the Schwartz abode. Fact was, Leah had purposely
 Milnlii'il up her duties in a jiffy, having clearly recognized
 I \<ffy as she watched the threesome tugging on the nine-foot
 Bh from the dining-room window, hoping against hope to
 HtMil either shaking his hand or looking him in the eye.
 H Miraculously she had. She'd called rather softly, "Happy
 Sprint mas," over her shoulder to Lorraine, not wanting to
 H)W a smidgen of attention to herself, then hurried out the
 ^ft(H', loo nervous to look back, she found herself rushing
 ^Wn Georgetown Road, heart in her throat. She was most
 Htakl she might not be able to temper what things came fly-
 Hg out of her mouth if she encountered Sadie's former beau.
 H Thank goodness she's nowhere near Gobbler's Knob, Leah
 fHighi, awful anxious for Dat's farmhouse to come into view.
 But now, as she slipped into Mamma's toasty-warm

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kitchen, she spotted the pretty presents wrapped and waiting on the sideboard for the family to gather on the day after Christmas, when they planned to celebrate with the Peacheys. After the Monday meal, following Aunt Lizzie's desserts of nut loaf, apple pie, and hot-water sponge cake, they would exchange simple gifts, fewer than any other year before. Mary Ruth's absence would add to the pain of Sadie being gone yet another blessed Christmas. But Mamma, great with child, was the next best blessing of all. Leah could scarcely wait to hold the newborn babe, coming so close to the Lord's own birthday.

Henry had been soundly stunned to see Derek arrive home the day before Christmas Eve, in time to select a tree. The boy had nearly frightened Lorraine to death as he stomped his army boots up the snowy front walk and burst into the house unannounced, wearing a pressed uniform and tossing his hat onto the coat-tree in the foyer as if he owned the place.

For months, Henry had written letters requesting, nearly pleading, for Derek to return home for the holidays. Your pres'ence would cheer your mother greatly, he had penned in his most recent note. It appeared his persuasive efforts had paid off famously; their wayward son was seated at his mother's Christmas table of lace and fine china as Henry said a traditional grace, offering thanks for the bounty with which they had been blessed this year.

When Henry raised his head, he noticed Derek had neither closed his eyes nor bowed his head, and his hand held

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H| l..ik, poised fi) dig in.

H| I I, is lu- learned nothing from his time in the military? Henry

H|i I- it'll. I'or ;i moment he wished he might have saved his

Henry was stationary. But as the day wore on, things
began to lighten up and Henry had a change of heart and
feeling, especially as he observed Lorraine smiling and even
laughing from time to time, less in her hostess mode than
usually more relaxed overall. In fact, Henry observed, the
evening seemed as pleasant as many Christmases before
as they sat together exchanging gifts in the shadow of
the Christmas tree ablaze with lights. From the radio,
Bobby Crosby crooned "Here Comes Santa Claus," backed up
by the Andrews Sisters.

His gifts were opened and bows and wrapping paper lay on the
floor, Lorraine spoke softly, saying she wished Henry a short reading.
"From the New Testament. . . Luke's Gospel of the birth of my Lord and
Savior."

Henry happened to catch Derek's dismayed look. The boy abruptly
and, without excusing himself, left the room.

His footsteps were heard echoing from the hall, and when

the door slammed, Lorraine jumped. Henry pulled out a pocket
Testament from his sports coat. "Hi Mother," he said. "Don't worry over
Derek ... I have faith the Lord is at work where his heart's concerned."
More at ease than he had been in some years, Henry held himself for
the Scripture verses Lorraine appeared to have mined to share.

I

H I I ii I i I this moment, Mary Ruth wouldn't have admitted to HliiMii)-!
her parents and sisters dreadfully during the past

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weeks, but she felt an overwhelming sadness as she helped redd up the kitchen for Dottie. She felt sluggish this Christmas Day, slow to gather up scraps of wrapping paper and odds and ends of boxes from the front room. "I'd be happy to take the trash out," she called to Dottie, who was putting Carl down for his afternoon nap.

Meanwhile, Dan was out back gathering up dry cut wood from the timber box to add to the embers in the front room fireplace as Mary Ruth headed for the front door. Scarcely had she tossed the rubbish and closed the top on the trash receptacle than she heard a pounding of feet on the road. Looking up, she noticed a dark-headed young man running in a military uniform of some sort, though she couldn't be sure, as she'd never before seen a soldier.

She wouldn't have stood there watching, but the young man's angry movements caught her attention the fierce way he swung his arms as he ran, as if ready for a fighting match.

Mary Ruth felt so curious beholding this peculiar sight, she didn't catch the sneeze that crept up on her, calling attention to her, and for that she was perturbed.

Immediately the stranger halted in his tracks, his dark, dark eyes inching together as he frowned hard. When he spoke, she instinctively stepped back. "Hey ... I know you, don't I?" The frown faded and a smile took its place. "Aren't you Sadie's little sister?"

At once she was no longer startled, because she recognized him as the boy who'd stopped by the vegetable and fruit stand years back; this same fancy

fellow with the handsome features had handed her a letter for Sadie on that day. Just why was

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lite carrying on like a madman out there on the road, and on

| (Inistmas Day yet?

I "Jah, I'm Mary Ruth." She took a step forward to show

ill' i confidence. "And who are you?"

| I le blinked his eyes, holding her gaze. "An old friend of

I'm. lie's."

I She shook her head. "If you say your name, I might just |l<. ognize it."

I "Name's not important. Truth is, I'm home for the holiIdnys a wounded soldier." Here he leaned down and began to In ill up his left pant leg. "Let me show you " I "No, no, I believe you." She noticed his short hair cut on It In- side above his ears, beneath his uniform-style hat, so what plu-'il said was probably true. "Sorry you got yourself hurt." "Maybe you could help me ... so I won't have to go all

I lie way down the road to visit Sadie, after all." He pushed

I1 is trouser leg back down where it belonged and leaned hard on the other good leg, his right hand on his hip now.

"Just what did you have in mind?" She stood her ground, no longer frightened by him, though she still wondered what luisiness he had with Sadie.

"I've been thinking . . . wondering how she's doing. That's nil. Is she well?"

His question sounded strange. How would 1 know? "My sister's not ill, far as I know." The words popped right off her tongue. Besides, if Sadie were

still living here in Gobbler's Knob, what would she want with a fancy Englisher . . . and on Christmas?

"Well, I haven't seen her in a while. Thought I might

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catch her outdoors milking cows, maybe . . . present myself to her as a sort of surprise."

She sighed. "Oh, well, if it's my sister you're after, you best be savin' your steps, 'cause she's married out in Ohio."

He ran his hand straight down the middle of his hat, smiling at her in a way that suddenly made her feel uncomfortable. "Isn't that a pity. She was the prettiest Amish girl I ever laid eyes on." Then, stepping back, he added, "But now that I'm here talking to you, I think you've got my Sadie beat all to pieces."

My Sadie . . .

Something sprang up in her that instant, and she felt she best return to the house. "I oughta be goin' now." She turned to leave.

But he followed on her heels. "Wait! No need to be afraid. Don't you know who I am, Mary Ruth?"

She stopped walking and turned around and looked him over. Now that she was beginning to put two and two together, this was probably the boy who'd put her big sister in the family way the young father of Sadie's dead baby.

He limped toward her a bit. "You mean to say she never told you about me?"

Her mind leaped to a final conclusion. "So . . . you must be. . . ?"

"That's right. I'm the old man, and I mean to lay eyes on my son or daughter." He breathed in and rubbed his knuckles against his chest, displaying a sickening conceit. "Boy or girl, which is it?"

Silently she prayed; she felt she needed God's help lest this man standing before her begin to thrash his arms yet

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^Hti, directing his anger toward her. And, come to think of ^HiN limping was downright deceitful, because she had seen ^H tunning to beat the band before she'd ever let out her rfi'uM'je. "I take it ... you must not know what happened. Oh,

11' twin I sad, really." \ "WotI . . . what?"

I'I I ling her lungs with air, she told him. "Sadie's baby died I i- .ii' It ever had a chance to live."

I "Stillborn, you say?" To this he appeared rather stunned,

11'Mi yriKlunlly his surprise turned to obvious relief. Without so I lituch as a good-bye, he walked away, leaving Mary Ruth

It ill idl 11)4 there.

Ach, what a wretched soul! How on earth did Sadie ever fall Mil love with such a boy? she wondered. She could not compremi'inl in the slightest. Encountering him as she had, she hoped

t iul prayed the Lord had heard her sister's cries of repentance. HjUldy by now dear Sadie had called out to God for help and ^HlvcLicss. Dear Lord Jesus, please be near and dear to my Ohio ^Hf this day, Mary Ruth prayed.

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The day following Christmas, Leah insisted on Mamma resting after the big noon meal. Even though their close neighbors, the Peachneys, along with Adah and husband Sam, had come to share the feast, Mamma excused herself at Leah's urging and went to lie down.

Leah followed her to the upstairs bedroom, watching as she sat on the bed. "Here, let me help you," Leah said, getting a blanket out of the chest at the foot of the bed. "Are ya in need of more warmth?"

"No, no ... I'm just fine now, denki." Mamma leaned back and sighed, closing her eyes. "Will ya see to our guests while I nap?"

Leah nodded. "Of course. You have nothin' to worry 'bout." She leaned down and kissed Mamma's cheek, then quietly slipped out the door.

Downstairs, she found Miriam and Aunt Lizzie playing a game of checkers while Dat, Smithy, and Sam sat around the wood stove, rocking slowly and talking low. Adah was playing peekaboo with Lydiann, and Hannah and Dorcas were visir-

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ly tlllrly in the corner of the kitchen.

In the meanwhile, Gid sat on the floor near the wood stove, HffiW ' 'lt! Budget, pausing to chuckle every so often at one Hnrmis story or another. "Listen to this." He held up the ^W'i mid Dat and Gid's father both leaned in to hear better. IWnr folk over in New Holland had a letter the other day m1 I hry were gonna be getting a buggy full of company for

Il |nr, bill it says right here they don't have any idea who II lie." Uid looked up, a grin on his face. "So they're lookin'

(irtl to seein' just who's coming . . . and wonderin' if their

i In correct."

"That is funny," Dat agreed.

Smllby Peachey nodded, rocking harder now. "Seems to Btavliorver wrote oughta have had the courtesy to say who ^M vviis!"

H'Ymul think so, ain't?" Dat glanced at Leah, a quick In mi bis brow. He motioned for her to come over, and Hi wns glad to tell him Mamma was resting. v

^WShe's all right now. Don't worry."

^Elic went an4 sat on the floor on a round braided rug next ^Bid as he read silently from the Sugarcreek, Ohio, news^K. After a time he whispered, "Here, Leah, read this." He H,ted to a report from Lititz.

H went downtown and got myself a nice haircut last Tuesday, Hj^tnisb scribe had written. That afternoon Barbara Zimmer' H and myself answered jah to several questions asked us by our Hjishof). Then, quick as a wink, he changed Barbara's name H Zimmerman to Wert. I'm awful glad she said yes, and she's PPJO fifad I got me a haircut! : :".

Leah couldn't help but think next year around this time

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her name would be Leah Peachey. When she glanced at Giil, he smiled and winked at her. Leah's cheeks flushed and her

heart did a little flip-flop, and she wondered if he might give her his Christmas gift outside. Gid was pretty good at think ing of reasons to take her outdoors today. Still, Dat was tinonly one who knew anything of their engagement, except maybe the smithy and Adah. Neither Mamma nor Hannah suspected anything, she didn't think, though she could be wrong.

Aunt Lizzie looked her way and Leah ducked her head, hiding behind The Budget, hoping Lizzie wouldn't see what was probably written all over her face. Truth was, Leah was awfully fond of Gid and was enjoying herself this sweet Christmastide.

"Best be headin' out for milkin'," Gid said just loud enough for the two fathers' benefit.

That was Leah's cue to get up and go along with him. After all, there was no need for Dat to leave his best friend and nephew, nor the warmth of Mamma's kitchen, anytime soon. This, then, was her gift to her father ... so Gid could present his to her.

After Mamma's long nap and once Leah and Gid had finished the milking, they all sat down again for a light supper of leftovers. Mamma kept her hand on the meat platter, ready to dish up well before anyone might request seconds. That was Mamma, Leah thought, always eager to serve her family and others. '..-., :.,... ;;;; '.,-

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n'hr n ic;i I over, Aunt Lizzie, Hannah, and Dorcas cleared mlic liihlc while Mamma and Miriam settled into chairs I' 11 it1 wood stove and Sam and Adah bundled up and went l|m ii wulk, like newlyweds so often do. It'lil Mini Smithy headed outside to get the toboggans out ftp burn and ready for some snow fun. Gid and his sister run und Leah and Hannah carried the sleds back behind Itwn, to I he banked bridge connecting the lower level to lypppi*. C !id and Dorcas were the first to go flying down the If umiiLsl squeals of delight from the girls. IWillh Leah at the helm, Leah and Hannah piled on the wild toboggan, and they had themselves a turn. In nothing

I1 > n | (a|ot the idea to race the sleds down the hill. They did I iliii'e times, with Gid and his sister winning each run.

I"A' h, if ain't fair. You've got more weight with Gid on."

It | ii tintoel out the reason.

f'Juli, I hat's why," Dorcas said, smiling at Leah.

I"Try il with Gid alone," Hannah suggested, "and the three
Imlrk"

I"ll all of us an even fit on one," Leah said, laughing.

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lit) I he end, the girls beat Gid soundly. And when a stiff
L'l blew up out of the north, Dorcas and Hannah said they
rt ild and headed for the house, leaving Gid and Leah
Br once again.

I"I wanted to tell you, Leah . . . you've made this the best
lihinuis for me." He leaned down and kissed her cheek.
ISIk1 reached up and hugged his neck, but he didn't let her
Itlkkly; he held her close, his rough cheek against her cold
I, "Next year we'll be husband and wife," he said. "Lord

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"A blessed Christmas to you, Gid," she replied, happy u> be nestled in his
strong arms, grateful for his present a pret I y wall hanging of a special
calendar that could be used over and over, the days marked in with a
calligraphy pen. She could hardly wait to start filling it in.

"Once we're published at the Preaching service next year, I'll show you the
pine chest I plan to make for you an engagement gift soon to come." .-,... :
.>

She was overjoyed. What a happy day. of days! .

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Gentle snowflakes fell as Leah took Hannah along to deliver the birthday
quilt to Elias's mother after supper. She had been hoping for this chance to
take the one-horse sleigh down the snow-packed road, to get all bundled up
again in earmuffs and mittens, hot bricks at her feet.

Hannah was more talkative tonight than usual, perhaps because she missed Mary Ruth something fierce.

They stopped in at the Stoltzfus family's, staying longer than planned because the deacon's wife wanted to warm them up with hot chocolate topped with whipped cream, also offering a plateful of oatmeal-raisin cookies for them to nibble during the ride home. "Share the rest with your whole family," she insisted.

There are fewer of us Ebersols all the time, Leah though) while standing with her back to the wood stove, sipping cocoa. She glanced at Hannah, noting her sister seemed rather aloof, her face too pale. Soon enough Leah understood as she spotted Ezra . . . his back to them at the kitchen table.

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mtVt'T even turned round when we came in, she thought, sus-

Illy; Ndinc'lliing was terribly wrong between him and Han-

ii hill she said nothing, waiting for Hannah to mention his

klliti behavior later on the ride home if at all.

r'l luivi1 an idea," Leah said now, hurrying the horse just a

I "Id's stop by and wish Mary Ruth a happy Christmas.

Ifft would ya say to that?"

I" li, sister, could we?" Hannah's eyes glistened in the

I 'iiliiHu.

V'Wv can ... and we will!"

Leah wanted Hannah to end the day happily, and seeing

Leah was sure to put a smile on her face. Besides, Leah

was nice for Mary Ruth ... as was Mamma possibly the

first time their mother had looked so gray around the eyes and Leah had out earlier. If only Dad had been more patient, more lenient toward Mary Ruth, Christmas could have been less somber this year. Mamma would've had her spirits up, him- kind for certain.

Willie had in mind, Leah strained to see the bend in the hallway where the Nolts lived . . . where Mary Ruth now resided, a boarder to Englishers, of all things.

Hannah choked back sad tears, downright grateful to be

here tonight, though the evening was freezing to the bone. She'd actually thought she might become ill back there in her mother's kitchen.

How? What on earth had made him change so? His father's death could it be? Was he so angry at God he was putting his rage out on her? She had no idea what to think. Ezra was downright

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"I understand

standoffish and hadn't been showing his face at recent singings. Was he staying away to avoid seeing her? She hoped not. For her, it was hardly worth going to the barn singings any more a waste of time to ask Lizzie to take her and drop her off. There was only one reason to go at all: in hopes of being asked to ride home with Ezra in his courting buggy.

Deliberately Hannah turned her attention to seeing Mary Ruth again, though she also felt a bit distanced herself when it came to her twin. It wondered her, as she and Leah rode in the sleigh, what Leah might make if she knew

of 1 lathings spoken about at the Quarryville church that had added fuel to the fire for Mary Ruth. Her recent switch to the Men nonites, along with her renewed determination to get an English education, had set things off the beam between Dat and her twin.

Sighing, Hannah felt her breath literally freeze in midair. To think their father would send Mary Ruth away because of her stubbornness and during rumschprunge, no less, when Amish parents typically let their youth run free, if not wild. It made not a bit of sense. Has to be more than that, though i Hannah. Dat's ire is up about Mary Ruth going to high school!

She settled against the buggy seat, reflecting on this day the love and the laughter of the earlier time with family and the Peacheys wishing she had brought along the embroidered pillowcases she'd sewn for Mary Ruth. She felt strange ly empty, like a tall glass half full.

The lights from a Christmas tree brightened the window at the Nolts' house as the horse pulled the sleigh into tru-ii driveway. "Ach, is it such a gut idea to stop so late like this." she asked Leah. , .

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fMiny Kurh's bound to be homesick tonight," Leah |i t< <\ "(Vmon, a visit will do us all good." She paused. I m- Ih-si not tell 'bout the fun we had tobogganing with BU-V*. |:.li."

NhhiiiIi nodded. She struggled with guilt at having spoffiui M> boldly to Mary Ruth after going with her to tyvillr that single night. "I wouldn't think of adding I 'i,illness to her," she mumbled as they picked their way I ilu-snow and ice to the back door. Not one little bit.

ll>mn;ill embraced Mary Ruth in the entryway of the ill-' Imr house. "Oh, how I miss you, sister!" she whispered. "I miss you," Mary Ruth said, clinging to her. bit'.ih wrapped her arms around both twins, and the three Hi in siodd hugging and weeping.

B^li'i ii lime Mary Ruth showed them into the front room,
i i lu- tree stood alight with shimmering tinsel strands
I i. ill I nibbling lights. They spoke softly to each other, Mary
! i ilc ling most of the talking, as usual. "How's Mamma feel-
-lic asked.

In- had to rest awhile following the noon meal," Leah
"I, "but she was back up again before supper and had
II ;i right nice time." Then Leah began to share the news
,uimi and Luke Bontrager's baby boy, born six days ago.
-liny Ruth asked, "I wonder who could get word about
nil's first baby to our sister?" Leah knew she meant Sadie
I uit I politely refrained from mentioning the forbidden

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name. After some discussion, none of them felt the urgency to force the
issue.

There was an awkward pause, and then Hannah spoke up, "The smithy's
whole family came to our house today." She seemed eager to change the
subject. "Adah and Sam sure :inan awful cute couple."

Leah nodded, eyes fixed on the sparkling tree while Mmy Ruth sat with her
hands folded against the black of lu-i mourning dress and apron.

Hannah recalled Adah and Sam's wedding, where Li:ili and Dorcas had stood up as bridesmaids, along with Adali', same-age cousin, Rachel Peachey. What a joyful day it lim I been. Leah herself had been absolutely radiant almost like .1 bride.

Suddenly Hannah felt sorry all over again for Mary Ruili, having lost her beau to death. I shouldn't have mentioned Ailtth and Sam, she thought, chagrined.

Quickly Hannah said, "If I'd known we were go in' to stop by here, I would've brought the present I made for you. Aw, that's too bad."

Leah shook her head, her hazel eyes shimmering willi tears. "The idea to surprise you popped in my head on 0111 way back from taking the birthday quilt to Deacon Stoltzfus':. wife."

"Oh jah . . . and how nice of you," Mary Ruth said, fill inc. in as both Hannah and Leah brushed tears away. "S'pose Mi-1. Stoltzfus was awful glad to have it."

"She was," Leah spoke up. "I hope it brought some cluvi to the house, 'cause it was awful hard seeing them ... all ol them lookin'so forlorn."

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I'I li >\v 11 id Ezra seem to you?" asked Mary Ruth. Bin- n-lcTcnce to his name sliced through Hannah's heart, jiiin'i himself a'tall," she managed to say. [Well, iind no wonder," Mary Ruth said softly. "I ran into lili In hrother Leroy the other day at Central Market in hii >wn Lancaster. He told me how worried he was. . . that h moi so sure anymore 'bout staying Amish. Feels the Lord I iiiok ;ivvay his best brother."

liny were silent for a time and then Leah said softly, II pray Ezra changes his mind and doesn't get himself

IlKil,"

I l-iuhah stiffened at her sister's words but said nothing. "I I- II need time to grieve, of course." Mary Ruth reached (I miinh's hand. "I say you're right, Leah. We'll pray." It .Hiding up, Hannah went to the Christmas tree and [I I'l-lnrc it, hoping not to hear further talk of her beau.

\f:. were dazzled by the brightness and vivid colors.

< .in ya think of stayin' on here, sister?" she asked I-. "l.livin' with Englishers 'n' all? Can't ya make things i u'iuh Hat afed come on home?" Tonight would be the

i liming for such a thing, she thought. "It's so near to i'.Unas, after all."

In' was surprised to find Mary Ruth at her side just that I'. "Jali, but it's not in my heart to leave behind my new"I laiili. It's the Lord's birthday we celebrate."

You don't need to tell us." Leah joined them beside the

plo, I 's'pose not. It's just that . . . I've opened my heart m Lord Jesus and His ways. I feel brand-new inside, truly

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Leah was nodding her head, as if to say she agreed.

Somewhat startled, Hannah stared at the tree. "Seems in me you've embraced the beliefs of Englishers. You're goin' backward 'stead of forward in the faith of our Anabaptist forefathers."

"You're upset because I found mercy and grace at a Mennonite church, ain't so?" Mary Ruth asked. "And 'cause I'm living here with fancy folk, too. Isn't that your biggest worry, really?"

Hannah tried her best to share the things that troubled her deeply possibly living forever apart from Mary Ruth but her twin was closed up to the Old Ways, it surely seemed. Mary Ruth insisted she'd found a "precious new thing," and nothing Hannah could say made a bit of difference.

She and Leah trudged through the snow to the sleigh and horse. Hannah felt awful glum as they rode into the crisp and icy night, back to the Ebersol Cottage. Truth be told, she almost wished they'd gone straight home after the Stoltzfus visit. '

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"Lizzie, come inside quick!" Aunt Lizzie called to her from the

in my way.

Lizzie and Hannah hurried into the kitchen. "What is it?"

Lizzie asked, fear gripping her. She and Hannah followed Lizzie

inside.

"Is Mamma all right?" Hannah asked softly.

Lizzie tiptoed into her parents' bedroom, shocked to see

Mamma thrashing about, crying out with her wrenching

fits.

"This is like nothing she's ever experienced before," Lizzie

whispered in hushed tones, eyes wide with concern. "She's

never uttered a single cry in childbirth . . . never!"

Mamma sat off to the side of the room as was customary,

liMigh Leah noticed the agitation written on his face as he

l|i| the newspaper raised high to shield his view.

I Lizzie asked Hannah, who was still standing in the hall, to

nil downstairs. "And, Leah, won't you go 'n' boil some

Iter.'" . . . >.,., . ; , .-, . . ;

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"Jah," said Leah, her heart in her throat.

"Please close the door behind you," Lizzie said over her shoulder.

Mamma's in trouble! Leah rushed downstairs to put a kettle of water on the wood stove. Swiftly she headed back upstairs to stand at Mamma's bedside. Her heart broke as she watched

Mamma struggle so. She wanted to do something to help take Mamma's pulse, perhaps, while Dat counted the seconds steadily. Jah, this one thing I can do!

Tenderly she held her mother's weak arm, feeling the pulse . . . much too slow. Mamma's heartbeat was fading in strength even as Leah pressed her fingers against the white wrist.

"Hannah must ride immediately to get the midwife," Leah said, reliving the night Sadie had travailed with the birth of her dead son.

"No . . . no, it should be the Hexedokder," said Dat, still hiding behind his paper. "We daresn't take any chances."

Mamma tried to lift her head. "No, Abram, not..." Her voice trailed off.

"Ida does not want the powwow doctor settin' foot in this house," Lizzie insisted, clearly speaking on behalf of Mamma. "Better to call for Anna Mae Yoder, the midwife. She'll know what to do."

"Well, whoever Hannah gets, tell her to make it snappy!" demanded Dat, lowering his newspaper momentarily.

Reluctant to leave Mamma's side, Leah turned and fled the room yet again.

"What's happened ... to my prayer ... veiling?" Ida

.' ;..'" ; .'" : ' : 192 . ' -: ' ' " ' '193ac r if ic <

|m>I'ihI, reaching her right hand up and finding her head bare ' he lay in her bed. She felt utterly dismayed at this discov-

. her long hair having come loose from its bun. Such proi u^ed labor . . . never ending it seemed. She tried hard to i Hi the words, make them sound sensible, understandable,

i her lips would not cooperate. Ever so frustrating when she

11 lift! to communicate this needful thing.

"My dear, your head covering's unnecessary just now," I'liun said, his face close to hers. She smelled pipe tobacco it his breath, sweet and soothing, and she longed for him to

I > ill I her in his arms.

"I'm sinking, Abram. Oh, Lizzie . . . help me. I fear I'm ai .Illn'."

"You're right here, dearest sister." It was Lizzie's voice, soft "id gentle. "The midwife will be on her way soon. Press on, I'l.i. Don't give up."

"Find my . . . prayer veiling," she said again, yearning for

I1 She made an excruciating effort to open her eyes. "Please I' i this thing ... I ask."

She was aware of Abram's hand on hers, the gentle dabl'iiiij; of a damp towel at her forehead. "Ida .. . dear one," he ,,d.

She fell into what seemed to be a deep sleep, suddenly free

of stabbing pain. In her stupor, she felt the loving hands of

Hannah Lizzie or Leah placing her head covering atop her head, 'till she was
tying it tenderly beneath her chin.

"Da Hen sei mit du . . . the Lord be with you," said Lizzie and kissed her
forehead.

A blissful warm nothingness overtook her, and she was helpless to resist.
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Hannah felt she was nearly flying in the family sleigh, hugging the mare as
best she could. After dropping the midwife off at home, she turned right
around and rode up the road to the Nolts' place. There she timidly
knocked on the door, only to stand on the porch, waiting. In her dire need
for a quick response, she remembered it was growing quite late and looked
to see if the Christmas tree was still blazing merrily in the front window.
She stepped to the side of the door and saw the front room was dark; not a
light was on anywhere on the main level of the house that she could tell.
Thinking she best hurry, she pressed the doorbell and stepped back, hearing
the ding-dong-ding of the chime, feeling terribly intrusive and wishing
there was a way to alert Mary Ruth without waking up the entire family.

As it turned out, Dan Nolt came to the door in his long bathrobe and
slippers. She told him why she'd come at such an hour, apologizing. "Shall I
call for Dr. Schwartz?" the man asked with concern in his eyes.

"The Amish midwife is with Mamma now" was all she said.

"Very well," he said. "But if you have any qualms at all... the doctor is just
around the corner. It would be no trouble at all to summon him."

Hannah wasn't sure what to do; with both Aunt Lizzie and the midwife tending to Mamma, surely all would be well. "Denki, but no," she said shyly. It was terribly unnerving to be speaking about Mamma's care with the head of this English household, of all things!

Soon she found herself upstairs in the grand house, waiting for Mary Ruth in her fine-looking bedroom. Her twin

195Q}acrljlce

i>Mt'kly dressed around, anxiety in her eyes. And together the i "-I i i)l'I hem hurried home.

"My friend and sister in the Lord."

Rousing herself, Ida recognized the dim voice as Annie 'l.u) Yoder's. The midwife and her black bag were present at

I i.I Annie Mae would help spare her life and her baby's,

Annie Mae examined her and immediately said she would ' N'lnpr to reposition the baby. "It's breech," she said, placing > in It- bands on Ida's abdomen, attempting to begin the for-nil roll, moving the baby up and out of the pelvic bones. 'In- did this several times, but there was no change in the hiliy's position, she said.

"The child lies directly across the uterus," Annie told

I1 itiii.

"Horizontal?" Lizzie asked. "'Tis dangerous, ain't so?" "Jah," said Annie Mae softly, "the shoulders will lead the

way into the birth canal... if I can't reposition the baby." "Well, keep tryin'," Abram insisted. Annie said meekly, "I fear Ida bleeds too much for that." Ida, in her haze, took Annie's words to mean real trouble.

Hlu-'d heard of rare breech positions. But this. Oh, my dear

Ida's life is in jeopardy. Father in heaven, help Annie Mae know what to do!

The intense contractions began again. She held on to the twisted sheet, desperately wanting to control her cries but to no avail.

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"I earnestly urge you is

"My dear Ida, the baby and you . . . both are in an awful bad way," the older woman said when the birth pangs abated momentarily.

"Help my wife live," Abram said. "This I beg of you."

No . . . no, Abram . . . the baby's life is most important. Life for this our son.

But try as she might, she could not verbally express her urgent wish. She squeezed Abram's hand the simple yet difficult squeeze of her fingers on his callused flesh.

"She understands you. Now, get on with it!" said her husband.

Ach, Abram, be ever so kind, she thought.

"Work with me, Ida. Help me deliver this child."

"Why not try turning the baby once more?" Lizzie was saying, ever near.

"Ida's hemorrhaging strongly" came the solemn answer. "I scarcely feel her pulse."

In a haze of confusion, Ida did her best to follow Annie's instructions, attempting to be stoic, as she'd always been in the past. In the far recesses of

her mind, she strangely recalled that never before had she needed a speck of coaxing or help. Not even with the delivery of twins.

Such a dreadful pain exploded through her, wounding her, lingering longer than before. Deadly. It continued, shuddering its fury within her till she felt she might break asunder. O Lord Jesus, I call upon your name.

"Do something!" Abram commanded. "Spare my wife!"

Annie Mae made the offer of ether. "Just a sedative whiff."

197C) a c r i / i <

I "I Vnki , . . but no. I must hear . . . my baby's cries," Ida^liiif!! >l lo say.

H| "Plciisc let Annie help you, Mamma," Leah urged. .

|Pl Kin could feel Annie Mae's breath on her cheek now,

iihu'lii)', Abram's. She was aware of the midwife's grip on her

>ik kind. She felt at once like a small girl again . . . she saw

>i- dmi sided Martin birdhouse in Hickory Hollow, where

U'YI ciown up in her parents' big farmhouse . . . the white

i 111Iitiise shooting up tall from a yellow daisy-strewn

uliiw. Martins flew together in family units, going to

ii'Iiut climes come autumn. Staying together. . .

She felt torn between this world and the next, weary of

iMn pilgrim way, drawn no, pulled ever so gently, even lov-

"inly :hh1, oh, she longed to allow herself to simply let go.

i i 11 v ; way to Glory Land, that home of her Lord and Savior

11' ir her heart, her spirit, her very being craved to be.

I'm something held her fast. Her dear baby was on his

is I lis little body was hankering for life, for air to breathe.

I In. wit boy would grow up without his mamma; she knew

ilir. in her bones. He was going to grow under the influence

I Ahr;im, to learn to plow and cultivate the soil. The good

mli . . . Oh, this son I am giving life to.

An image of a pond glistened as a breeze made the sun's I- i-isi's sparkle on the surface. Then, away in the distance, a ."iithful figure came walking toward her.

()/i, Mamma . . . I see you. You're coming for me!"My darling mother," Leah was saying. But Ida was confused by her daughter's words, mixed up willi her own mother's image near the radiant pond.

"Hang on, Ida," Abram said from the corner of the room.

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A surge of energy she had not known in hours filled her completely. She raised her head, leaning on her elbows, and opened her eyes to see Leah and Lizzie on her right and Annie Mae on her left. Dear, dear gray-headed Annie. How many babies had she safely seen into this world?

"Lie back, sweet Ida. Rest now," Annie whispered.

Abram's newspaper closed quickly and she heard him rise from his chair. Once again he came to sit on the bed. His kisses were on her face, her lips,

mingled with salty tears. "You stubborn woman," he said. "Ich lieb dich . . . still, I love ya so."

The midwife spoke again, encouraging her to birth the babe before giving in to the sinking end. "I'll help ya through this hard valley."

"Oh, Mamma . . . no!" Leah sobbed and the bed trembled.

Leah's tearstained face became less and less visible, but Ida continued to hear the dear girl's voice. Lizzie's, too, now and then. Somewhere along the way, she knew Abram must have slipped out into the hallway. Faintly she heard his voice along with Mary Ruth's and Hannah's, as the sounds drifted in and out of her consciousness.

I bless your name, Lord Jesus. ...

The bewildering falling sensation came, plunging her down again. Yet she knew she must cling to the thread of life, not let it slip from her grasp until she heard the first birth cries.

My life is in your hands, Lord.

Soon they came. Loud and pitiless, her newborn baby heralded his arrival with a strong set of lungs.

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"It's a boy, Ida! Praise be, as healthy as they come," iiniuuinced Annie Mae.

Thank you, dear Lord. She longed to see her baby, to lay eyes on this miracle of life. Her and Abram's love ... in the lorin of a tiny man-child. She looked but saw only blackness.

Then, suddenly, he lay in her arms, nestling against her, moving, searching . . .

"Mamma, can you hear me?" Leah pleaded. Precious y;irl . . . ever so concerned. Should she be on hand, attending I he death of her mother?

Ida nodded, though weakening as the seconds sped by.

OK, my motherless son ...

"Don't struggle so, Ida," said Lizzie. "Rest now. Rest. . ."

Ida began to shake her head, back and forth slowly. No ... no! The battle cry continued in her brain. Someone must care for this baby and his sister Lydiann, she longed to say I nit could not.

Hard as she might, she fought to live now, changing her mind. She must survive to care for her only son. She must live for him to suckle, bond, be nourished . . . and he did so as she lay there. Clawing at the walls of life her happy sweet life she gasped for her final breaths, her very lifeblood seeping away.

"I love you, Mamma," Leah said, lying down on the bed.

She felt the warmth of Leah's slender body and her loving arms slipping beneath her, cradling both her and the baby.

"I'm here . . . right here with you," Leah said quietly.

Ida could scarcely whisper, "Raise him as your own, Leah. Lydiann, too."

"Oh, Mamma . . . you needn't worry over that just now.

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Lu J2e

Beseech the Lord God to let you live instead."

Ida felt she might be left hanging in the balance between earth and heaven if she did not know what was to become of

her little ones. "Promise me this thing?"

Leah paused; she was silent for too long. Then slowly she said, "I promise, jah ... to look after Abe, and I'll care for Lydiann till she's grown, Mamma." Leah whispered the words, kissing her face repeatedly. "But only if need be."

Little Abe . . . Lydiann. You'll be greatly loved with Leah. Oh, be safe . . .

The power in the dying was too strong to oppose, yet she labored against it an unmistakable desire kept her alive and living till that "acceptable time."

Her baby nursed, making the familiar sucking sounds she cherished. Stay alive, she told herself. Let little Abe have this important start. Annie Mae touched her wrist, checking her pulse again. She heard muffled words . . . fading fast away. "I'm so sorry, my sister and friend. May the Lord be with you."

Yet again Ida was keenly aware of her mother's voice . . . closer, it seemed, than before. She felt the cool touch of her mamma's gentle hand, guiding her along. She felt more than she could see, vividly aware of the cross, Jesus' sacrifice made on Calvary's hill for her sins, for all humanity ... for the People lost in a web of rules and tradition. For her family, for young Lydiann, and now her only son . . . Abe.

Tears slipped down her cheeks, yet she was too weak to brush them away. Leah was seeing to that, darling girl. Lizzie's first and only child, here, caring for her in these fragile moments . . . connected to Ida as closely in death as Sadie had

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I'll live in life. Leah, filling her elder sister's shoes. Beautiful in life, inside and out.

Sadie . . . share your burdens with the Lord Jesus. She'll live with the prayer.

The babe in her arms went limp, resting . . . full of life; giving sustenance ... for now. He would sleep soundly, she knew.

Bless this child, Lord. Make him a blessing all of his days. . . .

"I'll help you go to Jesus, Mamma," Leah said, wet face u(,;iinsi her own.

"Tell Mary Ruth I love her . . . that I wish ..."

"Jiih, Mamma, I will. And I'll tell Hannah, too."

"But Mary . . . ach "

"Mary Ruth knows, Mamma. She's known all along."

Ahram whispered trembling words in her ear. "Ida . . . >l<-ar wife of mine."

"Oh, Abram ... be there. When the Lord . . . calls you, In- ready." She felt his strong arms beneath her, intertwined wiith Leah's. "I'll be ... waitin'..."

Breathing her last, she relinquished her grasp on the mori,¹¹ and utterly gave in to overwhelming love, the purest dis-

¹¹tiiing of it. The Lord Jesus was present, standing next to her i i\vn mamma, His nail-pierced hands extended to her. "Weli (ime home, child," she heard ever so clearly.

And all was well.

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iVlore crucial than Leah sitting through the solemn two-day wake with Miriam Peachey and dozens of Ebersol and Brennetnan relatives was planning how to care for and feed newborn Abe, keeping her promise to Mamma hour by hour.

She followed Aunt Lizzie's suggestion and gave the baby a small bottle of sugar water the first full day. On the second day she fed him goat's milk

diluted with sterile well water, purchased from a meticulous family who shaved their goats for exceptional cleanliness and flavor. Tiny Abe took to it with much eagerness, as if to say, I'm mighty hungry for life!

Leah felt honored to look after Abe and Lydiann, tending to them as she might have her own wee ones. She suppressed sorrowful tears during the daylight hours, only succumbing to deepest grief in the privacy of her room after nightfall.

The raw memory of her helplessness and the utter desperation of Mamma's final moments distracted Leah in all her domestic and, now, motherly duties. She would never forget the earnest plea in her mother's sunken eyes, as if calling out to be surrounded by their love.

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liver so near. As close as Leah had ever dared to be, paying ini mind to the midwife or Dat when she followed her heart >iicul slipped into the deathbed alongside Mamma. She had felt li rtjBistibly pulled to do so, wanting to help her beloved mother die peacefully.

On the day of the funeral Leah sat with Aunt Lizzie and

I he other women folk and raised her voice in song as best she

i mild, singing the old familiar Ausbund hymns with over two

hundred souls gathered in their home. She pondered the

i rength it would take to carry out her new role. I must be

irang today, she thought, refusing to cry as she held Lydiann

< hi her lap while Abe slept soundly upstairs in his cradle.

The ache in her throat threatened to choke her midway ih rough the second long sermon. She'd spotted the back of ' iinithy Gid's head just now, and the unexpected mission of taising Mamma's babies weighed heavily on her

mind, accompanied by her great sorrow at their loss. The future, indeed, seemed to stretch beyond her reach.

My help cometh from the Lord, she reminded herself. Please Lord, it be so, O God.

As the service drew to a close and the People began making their traditional line to await the viewing, she was keenly aware of her own weakened spirit. It was painfully obvious to her that Peter and Fannie Mast and their family had not cared enough to attend Mamma's funeral service. The news would have easily traveled to their ears over in Grasshopper Level, she knew; nonetheless, far as Leah could tell, Mamma's

204 : Leah's letter to Jane's ; ,

cousins were nowhere to be seen today. She did not crane her neck in hopes of finding them.

With steadfast heart, she squared her shoulders in reliance upon God, clinging to the hope that one day, Lord willing, the two families might somehow be reunited.

In the week that followed Mamma's death, Leah knelt at her bedside at dawn and dusk, calling on the Lord God heavenly Father for help and strength. But when Hannah came privately to confide her most secret concern, Leah felt nearly powerless to know what to say.

"I hesitate to speak my heart on this," Hannah began, her face ashen as she stood against the bedroom door. "Yet I must say it, or I fear I'll burst apart."

Leah reached for her sister's cold hands. "Don't mince words . . . please, what is it?"

"Don't know how to put this, really."

"Start with a deep breath. It'll come out better that way."

Hannah began again, faltering a bit. "Could it be ... do ya think Mary Ruth's leavin' home was partly the cause of Mamma dyin'?" she asked. "Did Dat's

wrath cause mortal trauma in our mother?"

Honestly Leah didn't think so at least she didn't want to think such a thing. Poor sorrowful Dat needed their kindness, not their finger-pointing. Besides, Mamma had struggled all during this pregnancy, Leah reminded Hannah. "She truly did."

: When Leah hinted of Hannah's worries to Lizzie, her aunt

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u-,iN adamant in her response. "Seems to me Abram has a mighty j*ut chance to redeem himself by askin' Mary Ruth kii'k home. That's what I think."

Leah was surprised. "Do you mean to say you think Dat would actually do that?"

Lizzie stood at the cook stove, wearing her long black apron over a purple cape dress. "Well, why not? 'Tis a mighty I'IK man who looks back on a bad decision and has a hank-

ilii' to make things right."

A imt Lizzie had hit the nail smack-dab on the head. But

I< isI who among them was going to bring this up to Dat? Leah liivered a little, contemplating the conflict that was sure to

ulfje.

Holding Abe, who was tightly swaddled in a soft blanket, si ic went to sit at the table next to Lydiann. She watched as lu?r little sister made broad red crayon strokes on the paper.

"Where's my mamma?" Lydiann looked up at her with big Muo eyes.

Right then she thought of Sadie's poor baby, gone to hi'iiven. All th*pse months of her sister's deep grief, her loss. . . never having held her son close

as Mamma had so tenderly before her death.

"Our mamma's in heaven." Leah forced a smile.

"I want her here," Lydiann said, making a round circle with her crayon.

Leah sighed. This was ever so difficult, yet she must be strong for her youngest sister. "I know, dear one. I miss Mamma, too."

Lydiann put down her crayon and leaned against Leah.

Leah signaled for Aunt Lizzie to take tiny Abe, then lifted

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Lydiann up onto her lap. She rocked her gently and whispered, "I'll be your second mamma for as long as you need me."

This brought a little smile to Lydiann's face, though Leah didn't know how much Lydiann comprehended.

Turning, Lydiann clung to her, and Leah rose with the toddler still wrapped in her arms and carried her into the front room. From the window, she drank in the white splendor of snow and ice . . . the stark blackness of tall trees against a merciless gray sky.

The Lord is thy keeper; the Lord is thy shade upon thy righthand. She thought of one of Mamma's favorite psalms.

Then she whispered a promise, "We'll have us a happy life, dear one."

"Happy . . . with Mamma Leah." Lydiann snuggled hard against her.

She hummed a hymn and pondered the future. Just how would the Lord aid her efforts? She knew not the answer. She

had only to listen to God's voice one day at a time. I must not fear the morrow. . . .

With a kiss on the head, she put Lydiann down, and the two of them wandered back to the kitchen. Abe slept in his cradle not far from the cook stove, where Aunt Lizzie was frying up some chicken.

"There's something I've been thinking 'bout." Lizzie's voice startled her.

"What's that?" Leah turned slightly, watching Mamma's sister at the stove.

"You oughta get out some this week. Goodness' sake, for a girl who nearly grew up outdoors "

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~ " I is ;il I right, really 'tis. Dat's got himself two hired hands,

I'm not much needed outside anymore. Besides, Hannah's

i> In tinppy to help Dat some these days, seems to me." She

i ut'd down at Abe's smooth forehead, his light tuft of hair.

I wwi Ho|)/)li . . . "As for me, I like bein' with these beloved kiMi'S."

"Smithy Gid won't be able to help Abram near as much nitCi* the two of you get hitched, ain't so?" Aunt Lizzie was h mking down at the frying pan and rightly so. "Don't ya go .iiyin' you ain't marryin' him ... I see how the two of you

I1 iok ;ii each other."

I-L'nh said nothing. Let Aunt Lizzie say what she wanted. I mill was, she needed to talk to her beau here before too l> Hi); needed to share with him the important promise she'd m.ulr to Mamma. Pledges, nay, even covenants made to a ilyiii; parent could not be taken lightly. She would keep her uord ;md raise Lydiann and Abe as her own. But the more In- i bought on it, the more the problem increased in her Immii and mind. She did not want to hurt Gid, nor herself by I mi i ing ways with the man who planned to marry her. Yet she h.ul no idea how to make Mamma's wishes come to pass in li].;lii of that.

To soothe herself, she reached down into the cradle and picked up Abe, enjoying his sweetness tucked so close to heart. What am I to do?

Following the suppertime meal, Dat took Leah aside before evening prayers. "I know you have your hands busy

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with the little ones, but when you have a breather tomorrow, could you begin sorting through your mother's things?" he asked, puffy eyes betraying his mournful spirit.

She suspected Dat privately grieved out in the barn, when he was alone with the animals and his somber thoughts, remembering all the years spent as his wife's confidant and lover.

"Jah, I'll see to it, Dat, first thing tomorrow." She touched his arm gently. "You must know ... I miss Mamma, too. Something awful."

He nodded quickly, then straightened and went to the corner cupboard, where he picked up the big German Bible. His voice sounded dreadful this night, a husky monotone. She knew his heart was not in the reading of God's Word.

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First, last, and foremost, Leah thought of herself as a corn' pliant sort; except for the years given to her dream of marrying Jonas Mast, she had generally obeyed her father's bidding. But she felt rather bold when Dat asked her not only to go through Mamma's personal effects but to "discard everything but her old Bible . . . and her clothing, which can be given away to friends and older relatives." She spoke up, telling Dat there might be certain other things she or the twins might wish to save, perhaps as keepsakes. But observing the unyielding look in Dat's swollen eyes, she held her peace and said no more.

The night of Mamma's passing, she and Hannah had moved both Lydiann's little bed and Abe's cradle into Han-

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11,ill's and Leah's respective bedrooms. At night Leah was

ilotted by the soft sounds of Abe's breathing as she tucked

11mi in, and his gurgling as she fed him every three hours or M a round the clock. This arrangement also made it possible

11H' 1)at to have himself a good night's sleep if he was able. I linnkfully Abe wasn't nearly as fussy as Lydiann had been 'luring her infancy. For this Leah was glad, not so much for lirrscf as for poor Dat, who was obviously aging with each passing day. Without Mamma to seemingly soften his harsher ililr, Leah worried he might swiftly grow into a cranky old man.

After Dat rose early the next morning, Leah got up and i-1 locked on Abe, who slept soundly, then hurried to do the ililhcult work of sorting through her mother's clothing. She pulled out one drawer after another, folding Mamma's things and making small piles on the bed. Opening the bottom drawer, she discovered a woolen gray scarf and matching knitted mittens, something she hadn't seen Mamma wear in the longest time. She must've made these long ago, when Dat was courting her.

Lovingly, Leah slipped her own hands into the scratchy mittens and wrapped the long scarf about her neck, tears diHiding her vision. Would Dat rethink his desire to dispose ol' these precious things? But no. Best to simply give the scarf and mittens to Miriam Peachey or another of Mamma's friends, what with Dat behaving somewhat crossly these days. Better yet, she could slip them to Aunt Lizzie for safekeeping;

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that way they could ultimately remain in the family.

She didn't know if she ought to be thinking that way, yet she questioned Dat's demand to discard all that had belonged to their darling mother. She felt even more strongly when her hands discovered a grouping of many letters from Cousin Fanme written to Mamma over the years. And another letter hidden away, farther back in the drawer this one with Sadie's handwriting clearly on the envelope.

"What's this?" she said aloud.

Did Mamma go against the bishop and keep one of Sadie's early letters?

She could not stop looking at the postmark. She had to know.

Going to the dresser, she held the letter under the gas lamp and saw it had been sent in late December of 1947, not so long after Bishop Bontrager decreed Sadie's letters be returned unopened. Dat had laid down the law, as well, saying it was imperative to follow the "man of God on the matter of the shun."

Why would Mamma disregard both the bishop's and Dat's final word on this?

Leah battled right and wrong, holding the envelope, turning it over and noticing it was open already. Oh, she groaned inwardly. I have to know what Sadie was writing to Mamma.

Hastily she stopped herself and pushed it back, closing the drawer soundly. The notion that Mamma might have been also writing to Sadie crossed her mind. If so, did that mean Mamma's soul was hanging in eternal balance? Had her spirit gone to the Lord God in heaven or not? She shuddered to think Mamma would willingly disobey the Ordnung and risk

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In i everlasting reward. Could it have been a misunderstanding: dial allowed this letter to find its way into Mamma's

.IlilW'iT?

She felt she knew her mother through and through. Mamma would have confessed such a thing before passing. Death unto life. Surely if Mamma viewed keeping and Mamma's letter as a sin, she would never have discovered it, Mamma!

(Coming to this conclusion, Leah decided if Mamma could find the letter and hide it away and die peacefully then Leah couldn't she read it, too? Taking a deep breath, she reached the drawer and reached for the letter, hurrying out of Mamma's bedroom to her own. There she put it away in her chest, where it would remain till she could take her time to

read it to savor and pore over every word and phrase, hoping for some clue as to what on earth had happened between Mamma and herself.

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"You oughta reconsider this, Abram." Lizzie was glad to have cornered him in the milk house. "Mary Ruth is your daughter!"

"You have no right to order me around!"

She inhaled and held her breath in, then let the words come gushing out. "Ain't it awful clear you were wrong 'bout Mary Ruth?"

His face reddened. "Don't go sayin' I'm responsible for Ida's death 'cause of Mary Ruth's leaving home. Don'tcha dare."

Sighing, she said more softly now, "Seems I don't have to, now, do I?"

He slumped and went to the window, looking out through the streaked old glass. "I don't know how a thing like this Mary Ruth's stubbornness and

goin' to live with Englishers can happen to God-fearin' folk like us."

She was more careful in choosing her words this time. "We let the bishop think for all of us, that's how. The preachers and Bishop Bontrager tell you how to feel 'bout your own

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tlui dues . . . your own Mary Ruth."

Ahrain muttered something about ministers being chon ordained by God. But when he began to cough, he iililn'l seem to quit, and she worried he might vomit, so I' li'iuuis'ht he was.

"I'll leave you be," she said. "I didn't mean to upset you so."

"You best be goin' indoors. Check on that son of mine," Ahl'Bin said it low but decisively.

Ht' needed some time alone, probably, out here where he -i hup times wept so loudly she wondered if he might be making I iitmelf' ill. But then she, too, was acquainted with such dreadful illness. Anyone who had lived as long as either she or Abram I new lull well the pain of disappointment. She wished she mij,;ht say he was merely passing through this life, that this old > trill was not his eternal home and the treasures of truth were i iiij up in Glory for him for all of them. We've got our eyes I*\M on what's all around us, she thought. Mistakenly so.

"Jiih, I'll look in on Abe, but Leah's doing a right gut job

'I inking care of him and Lydiann." She turned to leave, glad

111 luive sobbecL. away her initial grief, having cried herself to

11 cp plenty of nights following her sister's funeral. To suffer

.is a part of living; how well she knew it. Best to simply in. ivr on, make the best of life, and trust the Lord, as she had I' .11 nod to do. And love what family they had left.

1 lannah sat in her bedroom with her diary in her lap wink1 Lydiann napped on the side of the bed where Mary NmiIi had always slept. : ;. . -,,-

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With pen in hand, she began to write, reliving the night of Mamma's death.

Tuesday, January 3, 1950 Dear Diary,

One week and one day have passed since Mamma breathed her last. For me it is the worst pain I've known. I wish I'd agreed to Dan Nolt's suggestion calling in Dr. Schwartz might have spared Mamma's life. I feel fairly responsible , but I have shared this with no one. If only I had given a simple nod of my head that night at the Note' front door! Oh, what a difference a single choice might have made.

Leah says Mamma's passing was serene, that she did not : seem to fight the final throes of death but embraced it, once she knew Abe was healthy and had cuddled him near. It breaks my heart that my baby brother will never know our mother.

The night Mamma died, 1 rode to get Mary Ruth to bring her home with me, thinking it necessary. Dat must not have thought so, for he met us in the hallway just outside their bedroom door. When he greeted me but did not speak to Mary Ruth not at first it pained me nearly as much as to think of Mamma struggling terribly in childbirth. Mary Ruth spoke up, though, inquiring of Mamma's condition . . . and the unborn babe's. And she offered a heartfelt apology for having spoken disrespectfully to Dat prior to his sending her away.

Obviously bewildered, Dat said nothing about my fetching Mary Ruth to the house. Honestly I'd hoped he might've opened his arms to her and welcomed her back. But such was not the case, and we stood quietly, tears glistening, as Mamma's cries became fainter.

If Dat doesn't feel he caused Mamma great distress in the last days of her carrying wee Abe, 1 don't understand. Truly,

between him and Mary Ruth must have played some jmi /. If twin still lived here, she would surely have her say; //i'm at\ain, maybe not. Things are awful tense when it comes m Mitry Ruth claiming salvation "full and free" while living muter a worldly roof . . . not to mention her membership at fin English church.

All that aside, I'm beginning to wonder if Ezra wiU ever intend another singing. He doesn't come to Preaching anymore, either. What's to become of him? I've told no one this, but I saw him <m Main Street in Strasburg recently when 1 went to deliver more embroidered hankies to Frances Brubaker at her consign.' nicnl shop. Ezra was dressed in blue jeans and had his hair cut like an Englisher and was smoking a cigarette!

I worry for his dear mother. What she must be going through, losing two sons: Elias to death and Ezra to the world the flesh and the devil. If Ezra doesn't soon get back on the right jhth, he'll be in danger of the shun, just as Sadie was.

Along with the guilt I bear for Mamma's death, I also wish in goodness I'd stuck my neck out and talked to her about how to be ready to meet one's Maker. I could kick myself, because I missed my chance forever. Who can I ever share my heart with now?

Oh, I fear I might worry myself sick, and 1 might, too, if I hit didn't need me helping with the milking and other outdoor ehores. Such work helps me a lot, and 1 do enjoy working idongside Smithy Gid. He has a right gentle way, and it'll be ever .so nice when he marries into our family, probably next year, I'd guess. Leah deserves some happiness, and, at long lust, I'll have me a big brother. I ought to be counting my blessings more, but it's hard these days. What an awful way tu welcome a new year with Mamma gone from us.

Each day I observe Leah going about her responsibilities

~lu JBc

rising before dawn to cook breakfast and, on her feet all day long, up several times in the night with Abe. A shining example, for certain. Never does she complain, and I know she must be tuckered out each and every night as we head upstairs to bed. When

I can, I help her with Lydiann, but Leah's fulfilling a labor of love. Not only is she a wonderful-good big sister to Abe and Ly diann, she is becoming a tender and loving mamma to them, too. The light in her hazel eyes when she tends to Abe, especially, gives me hope during these dark sad days. : ...', . . : . , , V Sorrowfully, : ' ;,- '-.. '.. ... Hannah , ... -., . ,

Hours before supper Leah hurried out to the barn and found Dat sweeping, looking somewhat dazed. Her heart went out to him, and she wondered if she ought to wait to speak with him later, giving him more time to grieve before she unburdened her soul.

She started to turn to leave when Dat stopped his sweeping. "Somethin' on your mind, daughter?"

She contemplated simply leaving him be but found herself nodding. "Jah," she said slowly. "I was thinkin' I best be talkin' to Gid 'bout my promise to Mamma. But I wanted to speak to you first."

"Well, what's to say?"

Leah went on to tell him she assumed Smithy Gid would urge they now marry quickly, merely going before Preacher Yoder to make their lifelong promises to God and each other. "I'm fairly sure he'll offer to help me raise Lydiann and

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If ... the two of us, as a family." She couldn't help but wonder how Dat would feel, this coming from her.

"I 'id's a right fine man," Dat began, "but I'll be raisin' my lldien myself, and no two ways 'bout it."

She wasn't surprised. Dat was fiercely possessive when it hflf to his family.

"I suy you should go ahead with plans to marry Gid when I |lint' comes and let Lizzie or Hannah look after Abe and plnnn here."

"But Mamma asked me to raise them."

Hill" sighed loudly. "Your mamma was awful befuddled with I'pnin of childbirth. I daresay she'd never expect ya to keep |h n promise. Besides, you made your betrothal vow to Gid fere I lie one to Mamma, ain't so?" At that he set about ill Ing hard his wide broom again, making a rhythmic poshing sound.

Mamma knew my heart, thought Leah. She trusted me to do

right thing for Abe and Lydiann . . . befuddled or not.

I Before supper Leah hurried over to the blacksmith's shop I I he Peachey's property. She found Smithy Gid and his jhtT both shoeing horses, each mare facing the cement wall.

1c wide plank-board flooring was dry, having been swept If of snow and other debris. Gid chewed gum as he worked, It lobacco as his father often did, and wore a tan leather Ion that covered his legs down to his ankles and mischdich Itk work boots covered with manure. Unaware she was biding in the corner observing him, he spoke quietly, even

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gently, to the mare, bringing the animal's leg up between his own, clamping his thighs against it as he positioned the new shoe, hot from the forge, with the end of a rasp. Gid's hair was disheveled as he leaned over, his toes pointing in slightly to better keep his balance.

Glancing at the square-shaped brick forge, she saw the opening, where the blower kept the cinders hot. Smithy Peachey was almost too busy juggling his many Amish clients and occasionally an Old Order Mennonite customer, too most of them on an eight-week schedule. Because of this, his father sought out Gid's help several days a week, and Leah was fairly certain he was hoping to pass on his livelihood to his only son.

She waited to let him know she was present till Gid was finished with all four hooves and had accepted the exact amount of money from the farmer. Gid waved a cheerful farewell as Old Jonathan Lapp led the animal away, an obvious shine on the new horseshoes. The older man hitched his mare to a long sleigh and was gone.

While Gid organized the long tongs, hoof nippers, rasp, and other smithing tools, she moved out of the shadows and, coughing a little so as not to startle him, said, "Hullo, Smithy Gid."

"There ya are, girl. How're you today?" His grin was as infectious as ever, and she hoped for a lull between customers.

"Do ya have time to talk?" she asked.

"Why, sure. Always have plenty-a time for my girl." He removed his heavy leather blacksmithing apron and brushed his hands off on his trousers; then he went to get his work coat, which hung on a hook near the wide door, and slipped it on. "Let's walk a bit." Smiling, he reached for her hand and rubbed it between his own. , , , ; .. ,, :-,

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^V'I need to tell you something, Gid," she began. "Mamma

^Hii mi" lo raise her babies ... as she lay dyin', and I said I

Hhl."

^HiSmii hy Gid nodded his head as if he'd suspected as much.

^|"I I'iiin'r go back on my word," she said. "I wouldn't even

^HtutiM."

^H"No . . . no, you oughtn't be thinkin' thataway." He con-

^Hlt\L "We could go to the preacher and have us a short

^Hdlnng ;is soon as this weekend, if you'd want to. You and I

^Hltl live in my folks' empty Dawdi Haus, bring up the little

^Hl there as our own."

^Slu' figured he'd suggest that. "Just today I talked to Dat

^11 iliis, and he wants to do his part raising Lydiann and

^Hjl Ic turned and gazed at her. "Surely ya know I would do

^Hilc-ver it took to make ya my bride." There was a strange

^Hhincy in his voice. "But, Leah, I want to have my own

IPlly with you . . . make a home separate from our parents.

fh>\\\" you?"

" ('ourse it do, but things have changed now since Kliiiiiiniiii died."

Breathing deeply, she stared ahead at BlackJilhl Pond, where they'd played as youngsters. "I just. . ." She

Unit she couldn't go on.

m "What is it, dear?"

H She felt his arms around her unexpectedly. "Living apart

bfti Abe and Lydiann just doesn't fit with my promise to
ktmna."

Hi "But we're meant for each other," he broke in, fervor in
B* words. "I love ya so."

f She tried not to cry. "Honestly I don't know what to do,"

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she said softly. She didn't tell him she'd moved Abe's cradlr into her own
bedroom, that she knew clearly her infani brother had bonded with her . . .
that she couldn't imagine passing the responsibility nor the maternal love
off to either Aunt Lizzie or Hannah, as Dat had suggested.

"I've waited this long for ya, Leah. Surely I can get Abram to see the light
to let us raise his little ones in our own house."

"My father won't change his mind on this," she replied sadly. "I know that
for sure."

They clung fast to each other, there beneath the lone willow tree, where the
recent snow weighed down each slender branch and the pond was frozen
over rock hard. Where they, their sisters, and parents had ice skated, built
bonfires on tinshore, and played hockey on sunny winter days.

"How can I let you go?" Gid caressed her face;: "I'd be crazy to."

"Oh, Gid," her voice trembled. , .: ...:

"There must be some other way." ., ' :

"Surely there is," she whispered. "Surely." : ;

Sitting at the supper table, Gid stared hopelessly at tinmeat loaf, marbled
mashed potatoes, and scalloped asparagus, He could hardly bring himself to
pick up the serving dislu-s when they were passed.

"Something botherin' you, son?" Mamma eyed him cmiously. , He would have to make himself eat. There was no sharinc

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lili iunl Leah's problem tonight. Romantic difficulties were

lii- v vt Npoken of to parents, though at times, he felt such a tra-

>In inn Wiis fo an extent ridiculous, especially when his older and

1 i 'iff father might have some powerful-good advice to offer.

.Somehow or other, something had to give. If it meant

I .11- ing privately with Abram, he would. He couldn't simply

II ' hi* engagement to Leah come to an end. Nothing must be

11 i nlltteil to put a wedge between them . . . not even a dying

i'. .iher's plea!

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Hubert Schwartz paced the college corridor, eager for ltd I results of a pre-Christmas theology exam. He recoiled he memory of both Thanksgiving and Christmas: Elias tlf'us's death . . . and Derek's surprise visit. Still, the Plain Ki\i man's passing had caused a tremendous religious stir Biig Elias's own people. God had reached down in goodness I grncf, turning the tragedy into a spiritual victory. Robert wished he could say the same of his brother's brief Irn home. Christmas Day had been a far cry from his boyIt! memories of baked-ham dinners and laughter as the Illy gathered to decorate the tree on Christmas Eves. Derek I lu>m not only irritable but dreadfully sullen after cornllu une from a "long walk," as he'd put it, and no amount persuading on either Dad's or Mother's part could bring Hi imwnd. He'd wanted "something strong to drink" when

itormed back into the house. After not having seen him

1 much of the afternoon, their parents spent a miserable

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evening waiting for the prodigal to return, which did not happen until long past midnight.

Robert had been reluctant to leave Dad and Mother

alone, but he wanted to get away and pray for a time. Following supper, he drove to Quarryville and found solace in the stillness of the vacant church, pleading for God's help on behalf of his lost brother . . . and the grieving Amish family who had suffered the greatest loss of all. ,, ; -

Leah could think of nothing else but her talks with both Dat and Gid as she dressed Abe in his tiny pajamas, kissing each little hand as she guided it through the sleeve opening. She was truly glad for Hannah's offer to help with combing Lydiann's hair and getting her ready for bed, though she knew dear Hannah had her share of things to do in the kitchen and elsewhere. She has a knack for sensing my mood, Leah thought, grateful for Hannah and missing her other sisters terribly.

The house feels too empty, she pondered, carrying Abe downstairs to warm his milk bottle. Having Smithy Gid live heresurely would fill up the place . . . and Dat wouldn't be so outnumbered.

Yet she'd seen the look of disappointment in Gid's eyes, and she knew she couldn't take away his rightful place as head of his household. Besides, their own babies would most likely come along soon enough, and how complicated would it be for Gid to assume the fatherly role for his flesh-and-blood children but not for Lydiann and Abe? The problem naggedat her till she was altogether weary of it. : ' ;,, ,.

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I As soon as Abe was nestled in his cradle and asleep, Leah led the bedroom door and went to the bureau. Taking out lie's letter to Mamma, she curled up on the bed and hugged I lister's former pillow as she read.

Ipeccember 15, 1947\Dearest Mamma,

I I hope at least one of the letters I've written ends up being trecul by you eventually. Christmas is coming soon and the tMellinger children are ever so happy. David and Vera's new Ihtiby is already a month old and as sweet as can be. I Jonas loves playing with the little ones, maybe more so I than some young men 1 know. He's been so kind to me, \hiamma you just don't know. I think it's because he wants ihings to turn out well for me. I suppose I should tell you that ..:' I Irroke down one night and cried out my woes to him about having a baby out of wedlock with an Englisher and all. He'd offered to go walking with me after supper, and 1 just couldn't keep the truth inside any longer. You probably wonder how I could tell him such a thing, especially when I wanted to keep it a secret from everyone else back home.

When all was said and done, I did the right thing by sharing with Jonas that I was "damaged goods." He said he wanted to help me, felt sorry for me ... wanted to make sure I was cared for. That I should be looked after by a kind and good husband. 1 thought he meant himself . . . and he did. He said he would marry me then and there.

Of course, I argued it might be too soon, what with his having been in love with Leah and engaged and all, but he ii\sisted we get married following my six-week Proving time. We talked a lot about that, too, and how the brethren here seemed to understand my plight, not sharing my sinful past

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with the People. Honestly I felt the Lord God must be looking, out for my shi'Wearry soul. So in my next letter to you, I'll be writing to say 1 am a happily married woman. Jonas's Sadie, I'll be. I know you don't approve, Mamma, but I had to share these things with you.

I trust you, Dat, and Aunt Lizzie- are all right. Don't cry for me, Mamma. God has a way of leading wayward souls to Him. Write to me again, please? I miss you so . . . and my sisters, too.

I know you can't tell Dat or anyone else in the family how much I love them if you read this letter, that is but I surely do. I hope there might come a day when we will see each other again face-tO'face.

. . ., :.,. / . "'';>. , ' AH my love,' [> ... '... Your firstborn, Sadie

Holding the letter, Leah stared at it, unseeing. The welcoming curve of the familiar handwriting blurred all too quickly. Sadie had shared her sinful ways with Jonas, as well as the news of her stillborn baby, after having resisted doing so to the brethren here, when and where it was most necessary. How was it so easy for her to do that in Ohio? Had she fallen for Jonas's dear smile, his gentle eyes?

Not wanting to dwell on this, she let her angry tears flow freely, pushing the pillow aside. Had Sadie somehow used her wicked past to purposely play on Jonas's sympathy, kind and compassionate man that he was? My sister dared to combine hersin with yet another stealing my beloved beau! How could she!

Reaching over, she pulled Sadie's pillow toward her and rose, carrying it with her. She thought of pushing it under the bed where cobwebs and clumps of dust formed faster than she

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miM keep up, especially now that she was busy caring for a !! whom, as well as a two-and-a-half-year-old. Beneath the I.. 'I Wiis ;i good idea, because she would not have to look at tin1 pillow hidden there, recalling the nights she and Sadie Imil f*hiircd their fondest hopes and dreams, lying side by side, ilielr brads resting happily on their pillows.

hut no, she'd had enough of those memories. Breathing IhiiiI, Leah carried the pillow all the way downstairs to the

11 ih| cellar, where she stuffed it deep into the heart of Sadie's i ill I hope chest, giving it a good solid pounding before closing i lie I id. I never want to see this again!

With that she felt she was also willing to live out her ivlmli1 lile long without ever seeing Sadie again.

hiuk upstairs, she took the letter and began to rip it into

Mb iiiiny as pieces as her anger would allow. I do this for poor

HuDirma, she thought, giving in to a rising resentment she'd

PPtOtiis'lit she had long put to rest. And this is for Dat and Aunt

I i,'X,lc . . . for Hannah and Mary Ruth . . . hydiann and Abe.

Stopping, Leah realized she was shaking uncontrollably. I must surely desfgse Sadie, she thought, realizing it was true. She i nntinued on, tearing the small pieces into even tinier ones. Ihh is for Abram's Leah . . . who surely I will be forevermore.

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Be

JDefore her baby brother awakened for the morning, Leali hurried to pen a note to Vera Mellinger in Millersburg, Ohio, hoping to get word of Mamma's passing to her older sister, Halfway through the letter, after sharing the joyous news ol tiny Abe's birth and his good health in spite of the trauma, she noticed her jaw was clenched.

Leaning back against the headboard of her bed, she deliberately tried to relax. Calm yourself, she thought, but doing sc > was a whole different matter. The horrid way she felt about Sadie after reading her letter yesterday, well, she'd just as soon let her older sister continue on in her ignorance, not knowing one speck about Mamma. But such an attitude was cruel, even spiteful, and she knew better than to harbor bitterness. So Leah

made herself continue writing, ending with a plea for Vera to write back as soon as she could. Please tell me how to get word to my sister Sadie.

She signed off the way Mamma had taught her and quickly wrote her full name. Sealing the envelope, she placed the stamp in the proper place and hurried downstairs to don

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In I woolen cape and snow boots. At the mailbox in front of ilit1 house, she pushed the letter inside and looked about her, innrnlirily glad for the predawn darkness.

I he serenity soothed Leah, and she breathed in the icy Mi, relieved to have accomplished washing and drying the I tiilly's laundry two days ago, on Monday's washday. With I lunnuh and Lizzie's help, she'd hung out the many baby items "il tliu line, though it had been quite tedious in the wrenchii iy cold. Miriam Peachey had come over, bringing a large pot l corn chowder, which everyone enjoyed at noon, especially I Ml iind Dawdi John. And she'd asked Aunt Lizzie to keep I liumna's old knit scarf and mittens at her house conceal

11ii iii, really. Surely Dat would overlook Leah's momentary I'i(Illness when he came around years down the road and m illi. 'I'll how important it had been to hang on to at least one iii'iu of Mamma's.

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh myIn l/i, she thought silently while trudging back to the house.

She knew she must go talk with Dr. Schwartz sometime

nun possibly with Lorraine, too. They must be told that

ill hough she wished to keep her part-time job, she was needed nearly twenty-four hours a day here at home. The idea i hill maybe Mary Ruth might come and take care of Abe and I ydi;inn. for several hours of a Saturday dropped into her niiiul. But then again, there was the problem of Dat's determined stance Mary Ruth was not at all welcome in the luiuse.

Nix that idea. She might ask Aunt Lizzie, though . . . if what ideas she might have.

On the way around the back to the kitchen door, she happened to hear her aunt's boots clumping down the snow-

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covered mule road. "Hullo, Leah!" Lizzie called.

"'Mornin', Aendi!" Leah called back, standing near the back stoop, waiting and shivering, too. What would we do without sweet Lizzie? Life would be ever so empty without Mamma's

sister near.

Once she and Lizzie were back indoors, she opened the grate on the wood stove and they warmed their hands and feet together. Lizzie asked, "Are ya feelin' all right, honeygirl?"

Leah nodded. "I feel numb when I think of Mamma. But

when I'm holding Abe and Lydiann, things tend to change in me . . . some."

"'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.'" Lizzie put her arm around Leah.

Ain't that the truth. She thought again of Sadie's revealing letter to Mamma.

She sighed and went to the window near the long table. "I found something in Mamma's drawer," she began, "when I cleared out her personal things for Dat."

Lizzie came and sat at the head of the table, where Dat always sat at mealtime.

"Seems to me Mamma may have hidden one of Sadie's letters away on purpose." She turned and looked at Lizzie. "What do ya make of that?" :

"I shouldn't be surprised, I guess." .,

She felt the tightness in her chest, wondering if she ought to say what she'd read. Would that be as sinful as Mamma's own disobedience? She didn't know. "So then you must think Mamma disregarded the bishop . . . and Dat, too," Leah said nearly in a whisper. ,

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I "I loncstly she didn't much care for the do's and don'ts of Hip (Md Ways. She honored the Ordnung as best she Igiuihl . . . walked a line, s'pose you could say. She read the |(h hI Book from cover to cover nearly every year. She told iiiH she'd shared some of these things with Sadie, Hannah,

IiiimI Mary Ruth . . . and with you, most recently."

I

I Leah clearly remembered the conversation. "But what

I'l..mt Gelassenheit submission to God and to the People? IVInit was Mamma's view on that?"

I Lizzie nodded her head. "Sadly that was the biggest

11. i k- the push and pull of it all. Abram wanted to live by | tin- letter of the law, following the bishop's and the preachers'

I1 > < i y whim. This annoyed my sister no end. 'Tween you and in' , 1 think when the end came, she was eager to go home to

|py."

mt "Not 'cause of Dat, I hope."

B; Lizzie paused a moment, then went on. "She simply
tanied to see the Lord Jesus."

P "'Best to be in heaven's lap than caught in the world's
psp,'" Lea% whispered.

HI Lizzie patted the bench. "Come and sit. You have a big
'lay ahead."

She smiled. "Every day's thataway."

"You're doin' a wonderful-gut thing, Leah. Never forget," Lizzie said.

Abe's cries were heard just then, so Leah quickly excused herself and ran
upstairs to comfort her mamma's precious boy.

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The first day of the new school semester, Mary Ruth followed a group of
fancy students into Paradise High School. She was happy to ride the school
bus with other Mennonite youth, glad she wasn't the only conservative girl
on board. Naturally she wasn't nearly as Plain now as she had been, what
with her floral-print dress, though long to her ankles.

Thankfully Dottie Nolt had driven her to the school a week earlier, when
she had enrolled for the remainder of the year and taken her placement
tests. To her delight, she discovered she was ready for second-semester
tenth grade, even though she'd completed only eight years at the
Georgetown School staying home with Mamma for two years after that. All
told, she was well on course to graduate by the time she was nineteen a full
year older than most high school graduates, but that didn't bother her in the
least. The main thing was to prepare herself for teacher's college. And, here

lately, she believed God was calling her to attend a Christian college someday. She was on her way!

Busy hallways were disconcerting at first, and changing classrooms and having different teachers for each subject was also confusing. After a few days, though, she felt she would become accustomed to the schedule. Still, the sight of girls wearing knee-length wool skirts with bare legs clear down to the tops of their white ankle socks made Mary Ruth feel as if she were in a foreign land.

Getting her locker open was another discouraging situation, but, in the end, the problem had its reward. An attractive boy with brown hair and green eyes noticed her plight and came over to help. "I'm Jimmy Kaiser," he smiled. "You're new, aren't you?" :

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B : .lie nodded, afraid she'd say jah and scare him off, which

> i riiiiinly didn't want to do, not with those big bright eyes

K

>'l in|; ri|. :lu at her.

"If you ever run into a snag with your combination lock, Hi 'I me up," Jimmy said, pointing toward his own locker. HJ'in (inly five lockers down from yours on the other side of Hii li.illwiiy. Don't be bashful, all right?"

H "Nice to meet you, Jimmy."

I "Welcome to Paradise . . . High School, that is!" Grinning,

If Hi tried and hurried away.

I Well. She was entirely pleased with the first student she'd

KfI Pleased as punch, she thought. Does this mean I'm begin-

HfU! fo forget Elias? She wondered that plenty.

I Surely it was a good sign, her experiencing a slight flutter

luii a good-looking boy like Jimmy made the effort to cross

Bit* liliill and make her feel welcome.

Another surprise was the first reading assignment given in B^irn-i k an literature class: her beloved Uncle Tom's Cabin. She hew i he book inside and out, perhaps better than the other tndi'nls in trite class because she identified in part with Eliza, hr black slave girl, though Mary Ruth had never been abused physically. All the same, the book reopened certain sore spots Ini her, and she longed to see oppressed people released from pirirual bondage.

I That afternoon following school Mary Ruth slipped away

1111 iit lovely bedroom at the Nolts' to do her homework, writ' Iftg carefully the assigned essays and working the geometry problems. When she was finished, she knelt to pray, asking phe Lord to help her forgive the brethren, especially Bishop Bontrager, who ruled with an iron hand, much the way Simon

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Legree did in Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic novel. The man's shunning of Sadie had altered her family members' lives for the worst, she was sure. She also asked the Lord to forgive her for smooching so awful much with Elias, not having saved lip-kissing for her husband . . . and to guide her life as a Chris tian young woman.

Following Elias's death, she had initially decided to wear a black dress for a good long time, but recently she'd changed her mind and put aside her mourning clothes. Her newfound joy in the Lord Jesus had turned every part of her life around, including the slightest details. No longer did she part

her hair down the middle; she simply brushed it straight back and gathered it into a higher bun, and, like Dottie, she wore the many-pleated formal head covering unique to Mennonite women, with the strings hanging loose and untied. Not quite as Plain, true, but nevertheless not worldly, either.

Getting used to electricity and automobiles had been the easiest adjustment of all, though she knew she would gladly ride in Dat's family carriage if invited.

Perhaps Elias's death had been God's way of giving her a heavenly sign she was never intended to join the Amish church. Truth was, she enjoyed having modern conveniences at her fingertips, and what she was experiencing under Dan and Dottie's roof and in attending church with them was pure freedom. For the first time in her life, she could breathe easily, free from bondage, ever ready to honor the Lord in everything she put her hand to do, all the days of her life.

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Hp due t ime, Leah received word back from Vera Mellinger ^HSikIk' and Jonas no longer lived in Millersburg. Vera HM thai she hadn't heard from them in "quite some time" ^B|nk:l she was "ever so sorry" to hear of Mamma's passing. I"""" Prt.wm.jtj;. Why was it folk avoided the word death1. Was it] i. r in think of a person going from one place to the next, ! inn forward as their soul surely did at the point of death,

11. i' , u I of lying still in a coffin? The Scriptures taught the

I i -Mi|; of the soul from this life into eternity, from "death

..i.i. . Iilt-.

1 'hi' felt both sorry and thankful having read Vera's letter, .. I '.Ik' took it out to the barn, where Hannah and Dat were I. M ling out the lower stable

area. She regretted Sadie having

It is as if knowing their mother was dead, yet she was secretly 'In via her sister wouldn't be rushing home over the sad misfortune though Leah did wonder how such news would have affected Jonas if he had known of it. But no, she couldn't let herself wonder about that. Too much time had flown to the

* 'Outside she found Hannah wearing old work boots, in her own. When Dat was free enough, she handed Vera's letter to him. He stood with his legs braced apart and read it quietly. "Well, if that ain't a fine howdy-do," he said, waving the note once he finished. "She runs off so we can never find

Her ... even if it's her own mamma who's died."

Hannah blinked her eyes fast and Leah wondered if she was trying not to cry. But Hannah surprised her by saying, "You did the right thing, Leah, but maybe our shunned sister still can't be found."

Leah nodded in agreement. "Long gone ... she is."

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"Should I write to Cousin Fannie next? See if she has any knowledge of our sister's whereabouts?" She held her breath, unsure what Dat might say to do.

Dat hung his head. "Where the Masts are concerns I, we're as good as dead."

She took that as a no and accepted the letter back from Dat. Heading toward the house, she was eager to check on Lydiann, who was napping, and Abe, who was lying on a quilt spread out on the kitchen floor, the warmest room in the house. She almost wished Dat hadn't sided with Hannah just now, saying Sadie was "long gone." Had he given up on her ever repenting here in Gobbler's Knob?

Mamma's prayers while she lived surely still follow my sister now, she thought.

--

Abram had seen to it that his work boots were cleaned of caked-on mud and mule droppings before hitching up tinhorse to the sleigh. It might've been that he'd have made less a spectacle of himself had he simply gone walking to Daniel Nolt's place, but now as Abram reined in his horse in the driveway of the fine house, he sat there, not sure what to do next.

Just why he'd come, he wasn't altogether certain. He knew it had to do with the short letter from Ohio that Leah had him read. Something mighty sorrowful about it, he'd decided, and it had prompted him out of his lethargy. Not that he had been digging in his heels about visiting Mary Ruth; no, he just felt it might be the right time to make an

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He didn't see how his daughter was doing these days.

I \ Ir | Mil down from the sleigh and let the reins lie loose on

If will; I he well-mannered horse would be fine here for a few

minutes. Next thing he knew he was standing on the front

porch of a stranger's house.

When Mary Ruth came to the door with a bright-eyed

Unpter in her arms, he was taken aback and found himself

Uninij; a greeting. She was mighty kind and invited him

lit If even brought him some hot black coffee on a fancy

My They sat and talked in the front room, pretty Mary Ruth

himself, no doubt as foolish sounding as he felt.

I "I'll line to say I was wrong . . . and so were you, daughter,"

interrupted the conversation. "But now . . . well, I want you to

know Leah is coming home. Wouldja think on that for ol' Dat?"

She was quiet, not responding right off the way she normally

did, which surprised him. Instead, she stroked the boy's

dark hair, whispering something he didn't know what in

his left ear.

I "Your sisters Leah and Hannah would be downright

irritated. And . . . sorry to say, but you haven't properly met your :

new baby brother, Abe."

She "Named after you, Dat." Her eyes seemed to light up at

his mention of the baby.

I "Oh, Leah and . . ." He had to pause. The mere thought

of it still choked his words.

I "Mamma and Leah's choice for a name, then?" She was irked, him
along. Mary Ruth, ever dear; the daughter who Leah never lacked for a
comment. Leah nodded, still composing himself.

"I wished I might've comforted you, Dat, at Mamma's

funeral. . . . Still hurts to think on it." She was silent for a moment; then she continued. "I just felt so far removed from my family. I wish things were better between us."

The punishment had been severe; he knew that. "I'd <J> plenty-a things different . . . now."

"I s'pose all of us would." But in the end, she refused his invitation to move back home. "I'd be a terrible thorn in your flesh, Dat," she admitted. "You see, I started high school just yesterday, truth be told."

He hung his head. Things were spinning away from him. Nearly every day more things floated out of his reach. First Mary Ruth's odd declaration of salvation, then Ida's passing. He'd even received a fierce tongue-lashing from his father-in-law, of all things. Just yesterday John had given him what for about running Mary Ruth off. To top it all off, John had outright declared he wanted to go back to Hickory Hollow to live with one of his "sensible" grown grandchildren, where he didn't have to look at "the likes of you, Abram Ebersol, day in, day out."

Holding fast to the Old Ways was costing him dearly, but he felt toothless to change. With Ida dead and gone, it remained to be seen just how entrenched he would become over time, unwilling to stand up to Preacher Yoder or the bishop, neither one. Ida had found her strength in the Lord, she'd always said. As for himself, he couldn't see getting down on his knees and speaking words to the Almighty into the air. Lizzie, on the other hand, wasn't afraid to say she set ample time aside each day to do so. "You oughta try it once," she'd told him the day after Ida's funeral, when she'd found him coughing and weeping beside the feed trough as if his life was

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<\ i She'd been awful bold and said right out, "Prayer will ii Ip y;i, Ahram. 1 know this to be true."

: iihhorn as he was, he had not followed her suggestion nil li;ul no intention of talking to Creator-God that way. l'iiir.%1 lo Pete, what was this old world coming to when a ii hi was nagged on mercilessly by his deceased wife's sister?

I love you, Dat." Mary Ruth interrupted his musings. "I'll "in.- visit, all right?"

"|;ih, come see us. Hold your baby brother some, too."

When she reached for him, he didn't hug her back, only Sim lied, Surely she'd understand it wasn't in him today to be 'liilinii'ing her or anyone else. His heart felt more cold and |i m-i ia! as each minute ticked by without his Ida.

He' there, his darling had said on her deathbed. When the ,nii/ calls you, be ready. Saint that she was . . . Ida had put up vnli him all these years.

1 Ic said his good-byes to Mary Ruth and pressed his black i H down hard on his head. Leaning into the frosty evening, i> made haste to return to Leah, Hannah, and his little ones.

I i >n the way, he recalled Ida's funeral and burial service. It many people had come to bid a fond farewell. Even Dr. Itii'l Mrs. Schwartz and their elder son, Robert, had come to

I1 iy respect. They, along with other Englishers, including

1 l.i 11 y and Lorraine's neighbor, Mrs. Ferguson; Mrs. Kraybill, Lh.i'd taken Hannah and Mary Ruth to the Georgetown p> I nuil in her car all those years; and Mrs. Esbenshade, a frel|iirni customer of their roadside stand.

I ,Siic/i a time to bury someone . . . in the cold and miserablewtnind, he thought, lamenting that his wife had to pass away In iii'iir Christmas. Too

near ...

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For all his remaining days on the earth, Abram would regret not having insisted on calling for the Hexedokder. Any hex doctor would have known what to do to turn the baby within Ida; the awful bleeding could have been stopped, no matter how far his wife had slipped away. But Ida had made her most holy choice, her final stand she who had rejected the powwow practices all their married life. Even unto death, he'd wrongly let her have her say.

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I leiviiifj; cold temperatures lingered through January. Roads In'iiuiic miserably icy and snow-packed as one blizzard folli iwcd another, with grooves from horse-drawn sleighs and the > n r.isional buggy becoming deeper and harder to avoid as the liiys wore on. Power lines up and down White Oak Road were weighed down by thick ice, causing power outages for l'n^lishers in a radius of several miles. But the lack of electricity did not affect Leah and her family, nor their surrounding Ainish neighbors.

Leah was thankful for Dat's unexpected willingness to .illow Mary Ruth a weekly visit on Saturday mornings, since

I1 ^nve her opportunity to continue working at Dr. Schwartz's ilinic once a week. The doctor reacted kindly when Leah 'ihnred her predicament, wholeheartedly approving the hours best suited for her. "We don't want to lose you," he told her, to which Lorraine agreed emphatically.

"If you're ever in a jam, you can always bring the little ones here," she'd said. "I'll gladly entertain them."

Harder than juggling her life with its added responsibilities

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was the gnawing within the intense knowing that it w;is imperative for her to find some sensible resolution to the problem of her promise to Mamma . . . and her betrothal to Gid. She had been somewhat relieved that he had seemed to understand how important her vow to Mamma was how critical it would be day to day and year by year.

With that in mind, she agreed to talk privately with him when Gid knocked on the kitchen door one afternoon. Cordially they talked things out every which way in the stillness of the barn, only for Gid to conclude they must go their separate ways, releasing her from her betrothal promise.

Such a hopeless situation. Gid's right about this, Leah thought, dread filling her soul. Yet she knew for sure her husband would have felt terribly trapped, surrounded by an extended family he had no say about and having to kowtow to Dat on a daily basis.

In the very place where they had spent so many hours working together, tending to the farm animals' needs, Gid removed his black hat and reached for her hand. Struggling to speak, he said softly, "'Tis such a hard thing ... I'm ever so sorry. Truly, I am." His eyes were intent on hers. "One thing's sure." His voice grew stronger. "You have my truest friendship, Leah for as long as ya live."

"And you have mine, too. For always." She choked back tears. "We'll . . . see each . . . other, jah?" she sputtered, realizing how awkward it would be to occasionally bump into him. .:

"As good friends . . . you can count on that." She felt ever so blue as they parted, and then again a few hours later, when the finality of his decision and their good-

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prink her anew as she stood at the window and saw him BtH! 11 n-harnyard, heading for home. He caught her eye Uttivci I i' > her, but she couldn't mistake the look of despair

11in fiur.

I hen and there, she believed the best thing to ward off

I -!" misery for them both was not to interact at all, though Muldn'i be easy, since Gid was still working part-time for

(I Ik- winter season while the ground was resting would iIn- simplest time to maintain a distance. The spring and "Hut plowing and planting, along with the fall harvest,

ili I he much more awkward, since Gid would be quite vis-

mi i he property.

hi ibe dismal expression on Gid's usually cheerful face

Ic Leah want to turn away. Yet it wasn't anyone's fault

ii had become of them, really. After all, she couldn't help

i she had been the one Mamma asked to raise her babies;

ivas lor Leah to accept her lot with a smile. Truly, she

iMn'r imagine otherwise ... for the sake of the children.

I Gid kept his hands busy every day except the Lord's Day

Uo his loss of Leah wouldn't overtake him. He spent each wak-
[JiiK minute shoeing horses or clearing out the fencerow of
fhiiiiill trees. Diligently tending to another new litter of
t ifi man shepherd pups also took plenty of time, as did prun-
ini: his father's grapevines, keeping up with chores for Abram,
in ul doing whatever Dawdi Mathias needed done over at his
place.

He could not be angry with Abram for wanting to raise

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his own children. It just wasn't in him. Leah was doing the right thing by
her little sister and brother . . . the right thing by Ida, too. Under God, Gid
couldn't fault her or Abrani, neither one, although he suspected Abram no
longer felt an urgency for Leah to marry, not with a healthy baby boy
growing up under the Ebersol roof. Once Abe reached the age of five, he
would be out helping his father. Wouldn't be but ;i few short years and
Abram's little boy would find the fieldwork he was meant for.

Still, Leah was the kind of girl Gid had always wanted to marry someone
who loved the soil and didn't mind getting her fingernails dirty, who even
helped with plowing and planting some if need be. If he hadn't had his heart
so set on her since youth, this setback wouldn't be as devastating. He
suspected Leah had never quite committed herself to him not as she had to
Jonas so long ago.

He was in love with a girl he could never have. Quite stuck, he had marked
time for much too long and was now nearing the limit on age for attending
Sunday night sing' ings too late to ever hope to find a Leah replacement, if
that were even possible.

So Gid toiled long and hard, hoping to lose himself in his labor, burying his lifelong wish to take Leah as his beloved wife.

Now and again Abram insisted on helping with some of the baby-related chores, things he knew Leah was altogether surprised about, such as holding out the towel and drying off

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Jil luihy son after a warm bath. Once Abe was dressed for the
HlMht In his miniature white nightclothes, Abram put his face
'Fl l'ighl close and talked to him. He told his infant boy all
iill his deceased mamma as the sleepy bundle lay quietly in
iirin.s, whispering, too, what Abe's new mamma had given
. lo cure for him and Lydiann. He figured since Ida was gone,
l.' It*list he could do was spend plenty of after-supper time
'ill l.yiliann and Abe, which was a most pleasant task. Fact
11, lu' wished now he'd done the same with his older daugh-
11 when they were small.

|k One such evening following a meal of pork chops and ^HCU'y rice, he took Abe from Leah while she and Hannah ^H the dishes. Dawdi John and Lizzie were with him around ^B wood stove while he balanced both youngsters on his lap. ^M I ydiann giggled when he tickled her nose with the length ^HUs soft beard.

^M "Do it to Abe," Lydiann said playfully. ^B When he did, his beard made Abe, who was lying in the ^kgth of his lap, sneeze.

^H "Do it again!" Lydiann said, her eyes bright, even mischie^Us. For a fleeting moment he seemed to be looking into Hdle's little-girl eyes. "Dat . . . will ya?" ^M Sighing, he was more careful to be gentle this time and ^Id the back of his infant son's hand up to his own face. ^ften, moving his head slightly, he tickled Abe, much to ^Ui; inn's delight and to his own.

H 11 was as Abram chuckled and played with his wee ones Hiii he caught Leah's eye across the kitchen. For the first time H many weeks, his heart was full, gladdened beyond words.

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As the winter days wore on, Leah and Hannah took turns caring for the babies, trading off working outside with Dat to grease and mend the harnesses. Smithy Gid and Thorn; is Ebersol were out slaughtering meat animals at both the Peachey and Jesse Ebersol farms, which meant Leah felt moriat ease to go about her chores. Knowing she wouldn't run inti i Gid made her feel at once relieved and as blue as could be.

The occasional sound of red-winged blackbirds reminded her of previous rambles to visit her "piece of earth" and the rare thornless honey locust tree growing deep in the forest behind Aunt Lizzie's log house. But she dared not return there lest she be reminded of her first love and the many letters written to him.

The excitement of upcoming March farm sales brought plenty of chatter from Dat and Dawdi John, especially ;il mealtime. Even Hannah seemed happy about going along this year, one of the first times Leah remembered her younger sister being interested in such community events. Leah would miss seeing what machinery, cattle, household items, and odd* and ends were up for sale, as well as the occasional entire farm on the auction block.

Men, women, and children attended, and sometimes the schools closed for the day. It was a wonderful good time to see dozens of cousins and lifelong friends and anticipate the coming spring, but this year Leah knew her place was snug at home with Lydiann and Abe. Truth be known, she much preferred to be with them than spending all day at a farm sale, anyway.

How things had changed. She contemplated the fact

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Her peeling potatoes on a Wednesday afternoon at the end of May, recalling the many years she'd rushed out to milk the cows each day at four o'clock, before suppertime. Today she glanced at the day clock, thinking ahead to Dad bringing the cows home. What a cozy, even warm spot the barn was with all the animals all inside, waiting for their supper of silage and milk. Even on a bitter cold day like today, Leah missed the closeness to the animals, their breath warming the air. The barn had certainly handpicked a pleasant place for her to be born. . .

On a Saturday in mid-March Leah went on foot to the

mill, having arranged for Mary Ruth to spend a full day

with Abe and Lydiann, Walking up the sidewalk to the

mill entrance, she noticed a small white handkerchief. When

she stopped to pick it up, she was surprised to see Sadie's but-

terfly handkerchief, the one with the embroidered cutwork.

"Where on earth?" she muttered, carrying it inside.

Her husband was shuffling through paper work when she

noticed it. It was at eight-thirty that morning, so she set to work sweep-

ing and washing the floors, dusting, and then shaking out all

'I> nigs, deciding not to bother him just yet. But around
>iik fifteen, before the few Saturday patients were scheduled
.ii i ivc, she knocked on his open office door.

I 11' looked up, smiled, and waved her inside. "Pull up a

iMiir, Leah." She removed the handkerchief from her pocket. "I found us
lying on the walk. It belonged to my older sister."

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His smile faded quickly, and he was silent for a long awkward moment.
When he spoke, his voice sounded low and somewhat strained. "Are you
sure of this?"

"Completely," she replied. "This is the hankie my sisin placed over her dead
baby's face the night you delivered him." She paused a moment to breathe.
Then she added, "I'm sine you remember, Dr. Schwartz, because, if you
don't mind my sayin' so, it was your grandson born and died that April
night, ain't?" She found his expression odd so peculiar, in fact, that she felt
queasy. "It's the only handkerchief Hanna 11 ever made like this. A special
one indeed."

"Well, if it's Sadie's, as you say, I wonder how it found ii.s way to the
ground," he said rather defensively.

"I thought you might've tucked it in with the dead . . . baby whatever it is a
doctor does with a blue baby born to< > early." Right then, in a rush of
memory, Sadie's heartbreaking labor and delivery came to her and caught
her off guard. Leah couldn't go on not this close to Mamma's death. Her
heart felt suddenly cold, her nerves shot. She didn't know how she would
manage the cleaning tasks ahead of her. "I'm sorry," she said at last. "That
awful night still pains me so."

Dr. Schwartz reached out his hand, as though attempting to comfort her
from where he sat. "Leah, you are correel about your sister's baby being

mine and Lorraine's grandson, though my wife knows nothing of it."

She stared at him in disbelief. "You . . . never told her?"

He shook his head, hands now firmly clasped on the desk. "The news would have caused her tremendous sadness . . .

even embarrassment. I saw no need for that."

The thought came to her. He trusts me not to tell. "You

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fnN huve kept my sister's special handkerchief, then . . .

wliiewlu'iv safe, in case she returned from Ohio?"

t_ "No doubt, I should have given it back," he confessed,

^p\liii: loudly. "Now you have it in your possession. I suppose

^Bio lute to send it off to Sadie."

F' " Wr have no way of contacting her." Then she found her-

ill ti\idling up, sharing her deep sense of loss over both

in he's severe shunning and Mamma's death.

I I lie doctor listened, removing his glasses and seeming to

I' iwivptionaHy close attention. When she was nearly spent,

ill' i>tiililted to her, "I did not keep the handkerchief in a safe

I'1 " f, as you suppose. I guess that's of little consolation to

"I'm sorry."

Her mind was in a whirl. How could a warm and caring

overlook such a sensitive thing?

At home later with the lovely hankie in her safe, Leah realized she could neither show Hannah nor tell her as Hannah might ask questions about the night Sadie

had birthed her baby. While Mamma had told both Hannah [in the presence of Mary Ruth of Sadie's wild running-around days, making it twins privy to everything, the fact remained that Leah did not dare to reveal the story from her viewpoint. Besides, it wasn't necessary for Hannah to know all Sadie had experienced that night.

In the privacy of her room, she caressed the emerald-and-gold butterfly hankie and noticed not a single bloodstain. Dr. Schwartz must have washed it thoroughly in cold water

248 I love her, yes

following the birth. Folding it carefully, she placed the delicate item deep in her hope chest, deciding that was the best place for it.

Moved to tears, she knelt beside the bed and asked the Lord to calm her nerves, then offered thanksgiving for the discovery of the handkerchief the one truly important item of Sadie's she had in her care. She also prayed for God's protection and grace on her wayward sister, "Wherever she might be."

That done, she headed downstairs and turned her attention to Lydiann and Abe, who were in the kitchen being supervised by Mary Ruth. I must put on a cheerful face, she thought. Please, Lord, help me.

"Did it go well at the clinic?" asked Mary Ruth, warming a bottle for Abe while Lydiann sat at the table trying to string up a dozen or more empty spools.

"Jah, just fine."

Mary Ruth seemed anxious to talk about her schooling what subjects she enjoyed most and how she'd dillydallied about joining the glee club, missing the auditions by a single day. Leah listened halfheartedly, her mind on Sadie and the little one, gone to heaven.

Mamma is tending now to her own precious grandson! she realized suddenly. This thought comforted her greatly as Mary Ruth chattered on.

During a lull in conversation, Leah went and took Alv from Mary Ruth and held him close. She looked into the tiny face of Mamma's handsome little boy hair the color <>l sheaves of grain and those shining blue eyes and battled both her own quivering lip and the tears that threatened to

spill. : " ;' ?

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|/ \ I most before Leah could comprehend it, a full year had I' * .I'd, Caking flight on wings of love. Her hands found plenty

11 11, and she did it with all her might kneading and baking

11.11 \ loaves of bread, scrubbing floors, washing diapers, and |i l| 'in|-; with the canning. When the after-supper hours rolled lti> .hikI, she often spent time playing with Mamma's babies.

I ' in (dually her keen affection for Smithy Gid began to fade

He became more and more caught up in the routine of living for a now four-year-old and an eighteen-month-old. In the days she had never known.

Aunt Lizzie helped some, regularly looking in on Dawdi

He was due to his age. Dawdi was slowing down quite a lot and he hadn't shown any interest in getting out in the fields for plowing or planting this year. Still more telling, he no longer cared for being outdoors once the warm days crept up. Truth was, he had become almost as much a homebody as Leah, and she liked his company, taking the little ones next door quite

Dawdi had quit his fussing about wanting to return to

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Hickory Hollow to live there, what with Mary Ruth's frequent visits. Since Aunt Lizzie continued to dote on him like he was a child, Dawdi John had himself a right nice setup. There were even times when Gid and the smithy came over to chew the fat with him, especially now that warmer weather was upon them. All around, the Ebersol Cottage had somehow managed to get back on an even keel without Mamma's pleasant disposition and her wonderful-good pies, though Leah was mighty glad to have caught up on nearly all of both Mamma's and Aunt Lizzie's recipe files. Gid and his family often benefited from this, as well, since Hannah liked to take an extra pie or two over to the Peachey farm from time to time; a blessing from Leah's hand to her former beau and his kin in the way she thought of it the least she could do to bring a smile to Smithy Gid's kind face.

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Abram asked Leah if she thought Lydiann was old enough to go with him to market and was right surprised to be given the go-ahead. All the way to Strasburg, Lydiann chatted beside him, sitting with her little hands folded in her lap. "I wanna be a gut cook like Mamma Leah," she said, eyes alight as she shared a list of recipes she wanted to learn.

He had to chuckle, but not so loudly she might mistakenly think he was making fun. "You follow your big sister round, and not only will ya be a fine cook but also a careful gardeiu-i, plower, sower, and harvester."

"Mamma can do all them things?"

He nodded. "All that and more." ,

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I I vliinn ducked her chin a bit, like she was taking it all

I mi I mi her amazed at the talents of her mother figure.

I "'Innu'tliiy I'm sure Leah will teach you how to milk a

I'11." !>i' volunteered.

I I yilimm looked up at him, eyes blinking. "She already did.

u| | he other morning she sat me down on a stool, smack-

iiiiiHlcrOt'Rosie."

I "Mill she, now?"

|:111, and it was the funniest thing." Lydiann sighed,

|ii' Ming her hands and adjusting her small bonnet. "Mamma

pull Niiys I'll be out milking every mornin' once I turn six."

K "Is ihat so?" He smiled more to himself than to his young

uyhirr. Seemed Leah was bound and determined to create

other outdoor girl, which was right fine with him. The

I n M could definitely benefit from more than one Leah Eber-

lil, he decided then and there. Reaching around Lydiann, he

iigd her into a bear hug to a stream of giggles.

I ' lid was more than willing to help move Ivan and Mary In,i Troyer and their brood of ten children newly transllaiiied from Sugarcreek, Ohio into the farmhouse down iir in:ul from the Kauffmans' spread. Glad for a mild and In my clay, he carried heavy boxes into the large farmhouse, In well as the trestle table and kitchen benches. All the while It thought of Leah, wondering how to approach her with his BW . After all, they had enjoyed a long-standing friendship fully I heir whole lives, one that had even weathered the sad in neecessary end of their engagement. While he and three

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other young men from the church district got the new family settled, he considered stopping by the Ebersol home to vjmi with Leah after a bit. Out of courtesy to such a dear friend.

When he was free to leave, he headed up Georgetown Road in his open buggy, turning a sharp right into Abram'l: long drive. He noticed young Abe toddling about in the side yard, doing his best to chase after a red squirrel. The boy pointed a curious finger at the tree branch where the small creature had decided to perch. Abram came around the cor ner and scooped his son up into his arms, standing there wirhg Abe still pointing and jabbering. a

"Hullo!" Abram called to him. j

Getting out of the carriage, Gid waved and hurried acrolP the yard. "Catch any squirrels yet, Abe?" He tousled the tow* headed youngster's thick hair.

"He's most interested in things that move," Abram explained. "Leah has her hands full watching this young'un." _._ "I see that." 1

"Well, let's go, Abe," Abram said as he carried him ou toward the barn. Abram turned to look over his shouldtetB "You here to see ?" 1

"Leah," Gid said quickly, making his way to the back door. "Don't bother to knock," Abram called back to him. "Just give a holler. She's inside makin' supper." ;

He crept in the door furtively, quite aware of his own breathing. He called out her name. "Leah . . . it's Gid." In turning, she looked at him from where she stood at the counter. She offered that warm and lovely smile of hers, and he wondered if it might disappear once she heard his confession. "Got a minute?" he asked. , ;

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253CJacrific'

I ' -In- nodded. "What's on your mind?"

I had known full well that Hannah and Lydiann were out on

I mull- road together, for he'd seen them rolling a big ball

tin- ground, back and forth, as he'd come up the lane. He

perhaps no! waste any time before sharing his heart. "I've been

pinning for talk with ya."

I She wore a slight look of worry on her face.

I "I think it best you hear directly from me. Not through

her lips." He was conscious of the heat of his long-

I shirt for the first time today, and he tugged on the cuff

casually. "You see, I've become quite fond of your sis-

I l.iniiih," he started again. "I plan to speak to Abram

I mention possibility of courting her. If, well ... if it seems all

lilii with you."

Her eyes were suddenly brighter than before. "All right?"

"Of course, it is. Really 'tis!" Then she surprised him by leaning for his hand. "This is wonderful-gut news, truly." In that moment he thought he might hug her. But he refrained from doing so, squeezing only her hand. "Denki, lili! This means a lot to me."

When he stepped back, he stood there, gazing at her, his former love. His first and only sweetheart . . . till now. What an unexpected surprise that his heart should be reawakened with love by her when he hadn't thought such a thing possible. He had led to have taken time to talk with Leah, just as Abram had encouraged him to do. Thoughtful as always, Leah had given him a most precious gift: reassurance that all was well.

Lizzie's nose was but a few inches from the damp earth. After going tramping through the woods, needing a chance to

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clear her head, what with being cooped up too much flu-, > days in the Dawdi Haus with her ailing father. Bent nearly double, she laughed at herself, glad she was still as spry as ever. She pulled herself up from the barely visible trail and brushed off her long dress and apron. Goodness me, she thought, cracking a twig underfoot as she rose to stand. She'd never gotten her foot tangled in the underbrush, she didn't know. After all, she knew these vast woods like the back of her hand and wasn't any too shy about saying so.

They were, after all, her woods and God's. Smiling, she turned and headed back east toward Abram's house,

Springtime humidity hung in the air, making the moss grow faster on tree trunks around her. Creepers adorned the spruce and maples, leaving a welcome impression in her mind. Breathing deeply, she found herself thinking of her brother-in-law. He had begun to soften toward Mary Ruth, and that made Lizzie sit up and take notice. Ida's widower was also

noticeably less gruff in general. Lizzie didn't know what tit make of it, but she knew she liked working alongside him l\\, the barn and elsewhere a whole lot more than ever beforia Deciding right then she would not let up on her talk of thfl Lord, nearly daily now it seemed, she pushed on and madlj her way toward the clearing. 1

There she spotted Smithy Gid in the distance, climbingi into his open buggy. Same courting buggy he's had all these ycm\\,l poor fella. Seeing his carriage parked in Abram's lane sei I n-r J mind to racing. While she had long suspected Gid of Iniufj] sweet on Hannah, she wondered why he was showing up Lie in broad daylight.

Making her way down the mule road, she happened to sec

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Itili waving through the kitchen window at him. A dearer \i i/ii-ii' wcwr was, she thought, happy for Hannah but a little (I i .1 I i-;ih, who would never fully know Gid's love. Or any ln> .: lor that matter.

I I Viir Lord, bless Leah today, she prayed. Bless our faithful H ii'ii/i ynur tender grace.

I Wiili another summer came opportunities for getting klliinn and Abe outdoors, and Leah was glad of it. She liked I n|i|(*ikI an old blanket out on the back lawn and sit and V with the children, sometimes feeding them small pieces I n|i' ile and orange. King, Blackie, and Sassy wandered over L investigate the fruity treats amid squeals of delight from the kilt 11 en, especially from Lydiann, who was nearly as fond of it! dogs as she was her baby brother. Now and then Dat hi ill I stop what he was doing and make over the tots, paying i. i attention to Abe.

] 11 was late mdfining and Abe was fussy, ready for a nap. jiiniiah had just returned from the barn and came running [i -ituI plopped down on the

blanket. " 'Tis a right nice day, ii, . '"

1 \ic of the best times of year," Leah replied. "Wild roses n uvlul perty, farmers are makin' hay, and honeysuckle i i smelt sweeter."

And . . . young scholars can say, 'no more papers, no MMi hooks ... no more teacher's tetchy looks,'" Hannah hunlcil the familiar verse. "Sure am glad I'm not in school lyinoiv."

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"Your thoughts must be with Mary Ruth today," said Leali.

"S'pose they are." She skimmed the palm of her hand across the blades of grass, and Sassy came and playfully nipprtl at Hannah's fingers. "The house seems so quiet sometimes, all."

"How can that be, with the children growin' up under ol noses?"

Hannah sighed. "You know what I mean."

Leah nodded; she knew, all right.

They sat there enjoying the warm weather and a hint of breeze every so often, the scents of summer all around. Tli big leaves of the linden tree quaked gently outside the win dow.

"What's really on your mind, sister?" Leah said at last.

Hannah twitched her nose, looking at Lydiann. "Ho\ long before our little sister understands certain things?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

She leaned over and whispered in Leah's ear. "I need t(talk to you ... in private sometime."

"Well, why not say what's on your mind in English 'steai of Dutch? That'll keep Lydiann in the dark, if that's what yot want." Leah rose and carried

Abe to the back door while Hannah took Lydiann's hand and led her inside.

"I'll put Abe down for his nap," said Hannah while Leal sent Lydiann upstairs to find her dolly and a cradle.

When Hannah returned, her face was flushed. "Ach, but this might seem strange to you" here she guided Leal through the kitchen to the screened-in back porch. "I don't know how you'll feel 'bout this. ..." .. ' 4

"What is it, Hannah?" She studied her sister's eyes. 3

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hinwn, they were, and dancing like she'd never seen

I "Whnr I'm tryin' to say is, what would ya think if I told

I like Smithy Gid? Not as just a friend, I mean."

I I r;ili couldn't help herself. So ... Gid had already talked

Ijliiiiiih about the possibility of going for steady. She

in' .1 ,uhI clapped her hands. "Well, it's clearly all over your

Ii In nildn't be happier for you both of you."

1 mi i mean it?"

I I 1'iin'r think of a better match for Gid than my own pre-

|<ii. .inter."

I I liinmih kissed her good-bye. "I best not be gone too long,

"I'll wonder what's become of me." She turned and left away.

"Go on now. But be back for dinner at straight-up five," Leah called after her. She headed to the kitchen. Hannah served to have an attentive beau like Smithy Gid, dear girl that she was. No need to think twice on it. And she was the perfect choice for Gid, as well. To think that just might be his son-in-law of choice, after all!

As for Hannah, she'd been through a wringer of sorts, first with Ezra Stoltzfus's leaving the Amish church behind,

and then himself shunned so soon after baptism. The grapevine told her that he'd slipped and gone ferhoodled or worse after the death of Elias, as wild as if he'd never knelt his knee in baptism. So Hannah was better off, his dropping her like a hot iron and all, making it possible for Gid to have his chance.

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in June,

Leah found Lydiann talking Dutch to her little faceless doll. She was saying it might not be so long and they'd all be going fishing with Dad and "Smitty Gid" over at Blackbird Pond . . . and wouldn't that be such fun?

Lydiann would enjoy the benefits of growing up with a brother; something Leah had always felt she'd missed. She had been the boy of the family, so to speak, but those days were gone for good. She was truly the woman of the house, not only Mamma to Lydiann and Abe, but the matriarch in charge of seeing that the household ran smoothly, including the Dawdi Haus. She no longer felt she'd missed out on certain joy by not marrying, as her friend Adah and most every other girl her age in the church community had. Goodness, Naomi Bontrager was already expecting her second baby. |

In all of this, Leah did not feel she was fooling herself; after all, being a maid was evidently her lot in life, and her role in helping raise Abe and Lydiann was a good one. She had dealt with her resentment toward Sadie and moved forward with life, ever so glad to be a mother to her youngest

siblings. Truly it was God who had seen fit to bless her will) these two adorable children.

After the noon meal, Abram was right pleased to see Lenh outdoors with Abe and Lydiann in tow. He stopped to pump some well water, quenching his thirst while he fanned himse 11 with his beat-up straw hat. He sure could use a new one. 1 li;. father-in-law hadn't minced words about it, complaining in high heavens about how "awful ratty that old hat looks." John

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: P1111..I in pick at near everything Abram did or didn't do ijji liiys. He'd become a rather cantankerous sort, living

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jii ! wil hunt his wife of many decades and losing his daugh| Kin, nil in the space of a few years. Still, Abram could lirl nil loo keenly to John's hopelessness. In other ways, niifjli, |ohn had mellowed some recently, especially when it hit1 rlmo for Mary Ruth's visits.

Will) that in mind, he thought he ought to pay John a in himself before too long.

1 Imilcr from Abe brought his attention back to the presji " Thirsty?" he asked Leah.

I \ 111;inn spoke up before Leah could, asking for a nice cold jlnl hiTself. Leah looked right pleased, watching Lydiann

I

III'I (he dipper and sipper, the excess water dripping down || plump cheeks. Of course, now Abe was grouching for equal iMlment.

(Ince the little ones were satisfied, they wandered about it l.iwi) barefooted and laughing, soaking up the afternoon

11 I inn/. His heart swelled with pride, glad for this moment

p.nme and reflect on the good thing his Leah had done . . . A>> thing.

"Denki, Leah ... for bein' such a gut mamma to it i hlldren." He wished he'd said this a long time ago.

Hat ... that's all right." Leah gave him a warm smile. "I v '.tiein' them grow up like this."

"You've given up everything for my little ones." They nil know he was talking about Smithy Gid in particular.

"Tin happy with my life. Honestly." She paused, turning

i Invk where Abe and Lydiann had disappeared to. Then u loniinued, "I prob'ly shouldn't say this, but you surely \uw (iid's sweet on Hannah." She said it nearly in a whisper.

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"Oh, jah." He was careful not to react too cheerfully, wanting to be sensitive to any open wounds remaining from Leah and Gid's breakup. He looked her over but good. "Well, now . . . how do you feel 'bout it?"

She smiled again. "It's 'bout time you got the son-in-Invv you've been waitin' for!"

He studied her mighty hard at this instant, wondering . . . , hoping . . . then, beyond all doubt, he knew she was quite sincere. Eagerly so, it seemed by the look of delight on her pretty face.

He called to Abe, who came running and jumped high into his arms. "Come along," he said, offering a hand to help up Leah. "Let's ride over to Georgetown and have us all sonic ice cream."

This brought an even bigger smile to Leah's face. To the words ice cream, Lydiann and Abe clapped with deliglii, which made Abrarn feel right pleased with himself. The Good Lord was surely shining down His blessings. In spite of myselj, thought Abram.

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l,i ill was anxious to attend the July Sisters Day at Adah's
1" i wo miles away. Thanks to Aunt Lizzie volunteering to
II ill .ydiann and Abe, Leah was freed up to go with Han-
in I i.'zio had been insisting all week long that it was high in 1'ir Leah to be
around other adults. "You're in the house Id miii'li," she kept saying.

I I r;ili had laughed, recognizing what her aunt said was true
lit I If Hiking forward to the outing. The women folk did share
pill ' >l close friendship, even though she'd never much cared
li ilu-ir work frolics growing up.

I "hk-ndships are the core of our lives, ain't so?" she said,
pjiiyiiij1; the carriage ride.

I I liinnah nodded. "And sisters are always the best of
Irmis."

I "I should say." Leah wondered if Hannah was maudlin
In H ii Iht twin again, although Mary Ruth had been coming
I hit iliem. three or four times a week lately. Aunt Lizzie,
pwili John, and even Dat enjoyed seeing her, as well, and
iftnu'il for the delicious dishes Mary Ruth sometimes brought

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Lu J2e

to share with the family, though she was reluctant to stay a in I eat, out of respect for Dat.

"We're mirrors to the past, in a way," Hannah said solily. "We look into each other's faces and remember what vw

know. ..."

"Well, now, you're sounding like a dreamer today."

Hannah laughed. "Guess maybe Mary Ruth's rubbin' nil on me some."

"But what you say is true. There is such deep understand ing between sisters."

Hannah nodded and fell silent. Leah was thankful for 111 c

time alone, just the two of them. Scarcely did they ever h;withe opportunity to go out riding or to a work frolic like tin:. The sky seemed a prettier blue today and little robin red breast sang stronger because Hannah was here to share 11 itday.

Once they arrived at Adah's house, Leah was happy to sec Adah's younger sister, Dorcas, as well as Adah's five sisters-in law, Ebersol cousins all. The kitchen was full up with sister, of every shape and size, peeling tomatoes at the sink, boilinj: water in large pots, preparing to stew the red fruit, as well a;. make soup and spaghetti sauce an all-day affair. Several were expecting babies, including Adah herself. Leah found this sight, here in Adah's cozy kitchen, not only joyful on behalf of her dear friend, but she was excited for Adah to join yet again the maternal realm. "We're sharing the joys ol motherhood after all, you and I," she whispered to her.

Adah flashed a quick sad look, but Leah squeezed her hand to reassure her all was well. Truly, it was.

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Bllnm.il) helped mash a mountain of cooked tomatoes. m .1 lime the mushy red color and strong odor made her H iljir.r,y, and she wondered how she'd

ever manage attendB hiM 11 canning frolics as Smithy Gid's wife someday. His Bllin' side of the family was tomato crazy, putting up anyPli iiiul everything with the fruit in it. Far as she could tell, Hi!u<l\, ill at was the one and only drawback to her marrying

i 11H' Pcachey family one fine day.

In- i ried holding her breath as she crushed the nasty red

h , Inn that didn't work, either, because when it came time

11' i io breathe again, she had to fill her lungs even more I* ply with the fragrant aroma.

I I , Leah doin' okay, really?" Adah asked her, unaware Itim.ih was the one struggling at the moment, though not

i '< iDiKilly.

I "' .In.- seems fine to me," she replied, glad to raise her head til licr nose out of the immediate vicinity of the tomatoes.

I1 11 i's i he sweetest mother to Lydiann and Abe," she offered. I. .M should see her with them."

I "I'vi" seen hei*call right; I just can never tell for sure if pull's all right inside," Adah persisted.

I "|;ili, I believe she is." Hannah wanted to put Adah's fears |i 11-.1. After all, she and Adah were soon to be sisters by |,>n i;ij<c\ She'd told no one just yet, but, short time that it |,i I U'l-n since he'd declared his feelings for her, darling Gid lit* I not only begun to court her but had already proposed Itiiiiage. He wasn't wasting any time, which was right fine rilli her, being she'd known him her entire life and Dat, Bwvvd John, and Aunt Lizzie were all for it. "Long as it won't Hill Leah further," Lizzie had been quick to say.

la J2t

"If there's ever any doubt, Hannah, you'll let me know 'bout Leah, jah?" asked Adah, clearly still devoted after nil these years.

Adah, precious friend to Leah always thinking of other,, just as Leah was known to. And that nearly to a fault, Hann;ili thought. Sometimes my sister is better to others than to herselj.

While Gid waited to shoe his next horse, he set aboui redding up. Suddenly thirsty, he finished sweeping the flooi and ran to the house for some cold lemonade. Oddly enoii; l i, the kitchen, fragrant with the scent of freshly baked muffins, was empty. He walked to the window and stood watching hn'i his customer, glad for the solitude. Gulping down a tall glass,! he returned to the icebox and poured another. He then went-1 and perched himself on the long bench next to the table, sii-l ting there with his glass in hand.

All the while he daydreamed of pretty Hannah. There w;i,s something about the way she looked at him that made him think she was not just pretty but truly lovely. She's very young, he thought, realizing anew how peculiar it had seemed bur only at first to meet up with fair Hannah Ebersol at a Sunday singing, though he'd seen and talked to her plenty ol times out in Abram's barn. More than hesitant that particular night, he soon found his voice and discovered her to be nearly as easy to talk to as Leah, if not more so. Attentive and sweci, Hannah had won his heart in a matter of a few buggy rklrs home.

Right this minute he wondered if the Lord God might've had all this planned from the foundations of the earth, givin; back the years he'd lost while waiting for Leah. Was it heresy

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| 'lilnlt about the heavenly Father that way? Gid had no

j i mi. mi mI deliberating the notion, but it was true that Han-
Ui'tli ii only eighteen, had a good many childbearing years
nit- i I il her as his loving wife. They would have themselves
ti u ii.lfi'liil-goocl time raising their brood, and if their babies
!> .14 111 iinyr.hing like Hannah, he would be a very blessed and
Ih|'TV num.

11< removed his straw hat and scratched his head. The
Almighty certainly worked in extraordinary ways, seemed to
111111. I 'ownright mystifying it was.

I 'he clutter of carriage wheels brought him to his feet, and Jit, li'h Ins glass
nalf full on the table as he hurried outside to Hu hoi 11 horse and client. .

^H li was on the ride home from Adah's that Leah and Han-

Hp |m i to talking heart to heart. Weary from being on her ' i lot much of the
day, Leah was content to sit back and I is, lei Hanngji. rein down the horse
to a slow walk, and, of til ill ings, do much of the talking. She was getting
to be tu-iit ly as chatty as Mary Ruth. Nice to see her coming out of her /i.'ll
link' by little, Leah thought, listening to her prattle about ilih iiiul that.

They were coming up on the corner where a left-hand

H)oll would lead to Naomi's parents' farmhouse when Han-

^Bi lopped talking and began humming a hymn from the

^Hhlnind.

^B,' .mi t Ky Gid came to mind and Leah said, "I think you and

^1 ,in-a right nice match."

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"Oh?"

"Both of you enjoy music so."

"Jah, he plays his harmonica all the time." She paused) blushing a little.

"Not all the time, I hope."

"Oh, Leah ... you know what I mean." At this ihcy began to giggle.

Just then two old codgers rode toward them, their whlti; beards as long as any Leah had ever seen. They were leaning back against the seat, downright relaxed, just taking then sweet time. "Like there's no tomorrow," she whispered %m Hannah. m

The presence of another carriage made them quick gather their wits and stop the tittering, since the men weH within earshot. Once they'd passed, Hannah resumed thaH conversation. "If you feel comfortable 'bout it, I'd like you be one of my bridesmaids, Leah." M

"That's awful nice of you," Leah replied, meaning it. 4

"So you'll stand up with me?" -j

"Course I will." |

"'Tis awful sad Mary Ruth has no chance of being my: bridesmaid." ;

Leah felt sorry, too. "Jah, but I wouldn't think of askii\' j Dat's permission on that. I can imagine what he'd say." j

"Ain't that the truth." j

"Be glad Mary Ruth will at least be in attendance," Lenh ! reminded Hannah. :

"Jah, that I am." i

Leah, eager to cheer her sister, continued on a posiiivo j note. "Just think how happy Mamma would be over your i

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I mlng marriage," she said. "She always liked Gid, ya

I i l.miiiili sighed. "We'll all miss her ac the wedding, ain't

I I .-iili agreed and closed her eyes, thinking of dear

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fiiiiim.i

I I luniKih stirred her back to the preset. "I wish with all

I nr- In-art cine certain sister could be or> hand to witness my

I i^i1, loo."

I I rowsily Leah reached over and patted Hannah's hand. "I llmv, donr sister. I know."

I I I try rode quietly now, surrounded bf the twitter of birds |i I i In; scent of new-mown hay and earlY harvest apples ripSm.r in orchards. Leah found herself wondering how many |< .. I imes she might be asked to be a bridesmaid. Naturally,

1 nine went on, she would be passed over; no bride in her khi mind would invite an old maidel rP stand up with her. litybc this would be the last time, whicl^ was quite all right. W\\y\ with both Sadie and Mary Ruth having flown the nest, TV inuld be Hannah's supportive and gentle right hand. IlHiwing her, dear Hannah would need a close sister-friend In lu'i- wedding day.

I Evident in Hannah's eyes was hef deep fondness for Inui liy Oid. Leah was fully aware how m ch in love her sister Ilii I (lid were. The love they share is the ^d Jonas and 1 had L;.i/irr, she thought. The kind both Gid dM Hannah deserve.

While she had cared a great deal fof Gid, lately she had linn- lo the realization her love for hifn had not been the tine as her love for Jonas. She had matie this conscious dis-

11very simply by watching Hannah's fade when she spoke of

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Gid, and, on one occasion, by observing them from ahir ,i they held hands and walked together, Hannah leaning In-i head against Gid's strong arm.

The adoring way they seemed to bend toward each other, even as they walked and talked, brought back a rush of memories. So like the way Jonas always did. . . .

Upon their return home, Leah let Hannah unhitch the horse and lead him to water in the barn, as she had so kindly offered to do. Leah tried to swallow the lump in her throat but did not succeed. Hastily she headed to the house, more eager than ever to hold Lydiann and Abe her little ones = close to her heart.

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There is no greatness where there is
no simplicity, goodness and truth.

Leo Tolstoy

#

Truth, crushed to earth, shall rise again,

William Cullen Bryant²⁷¹^(IT*

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II., I

When the month of May arrived in misty splendor. Yellow daffodils mingling with purple and red tulips, raised their radiant heads to the sky. Creeks were swollen and bubbling, and it

When Leah heard every song sparrow, robin, and meadowlark [in a low voice] joining in the springtime chorus. Leah stood out near the hen house, watching Lydiann scatter feed, talking soft and low to the chickens and the solitary \i i it. The way she always did, she thought, smiling. Leah was lonely,

.H'llool door^--were closed for summer vacation, the last |ii\ li;iving been Friday, the eighteenth, one day following \ Ii.inn's ninth birthday.

i I ill I for her age, Lydiann reminded Leah of Sadie as a |liil.l. Though rather lanky like Leah, the energetic youngster 'in'I outgrown her topsy-turvy tendency to fall over not only h r.i'll' but also occasional buckets of fresh milk, half'gallon <in\ of shelled peas, and whatnot. Both Dat and Leah were Ii.inkiul for Lydiann's zeal for assisting with outdoor chores, Uniiii with Hannah busy mothering two small girls Ida Mae, ^iiiu-il for Mamma, and baby Katie Ann. Smithy Gid and

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Hannah lived snug and contented in Aunt Lizzie's former luj house, while Lizzie had moved down to the Dawdi Hans u care for Dawdi John after Gid and Hannah had tied the kiml at a late autumn wedding four and a half years ago.

Cheerful and hardworking, Abe was almost six and a hull and his father's shadow. Leah felt truly blessed to witness I lie close father-son relationship unfolding daily.

"That rooster's poutin', ain't so, Mamma Leah?" Lydiiiiin said, frowning.

"I daresay you could be right 'bout that." "He's mighty pushy, too . . . whatever's botherin' him?" She went to stand near Lydiann. "Seems to me he wanlN some attention."

"From one of the hens ... or from me?" Lydiann's swirl voice still retained its childlike appeal.

Leah smiled. "All the hens, prob'ly."

Laughing, Lydiann grinned at her. "Ach, Mamma, you're pullin' my leg. He don't want all them hens a-lookin' at hint preenin', does he?"

"Well, maybe not." She put her hand on Lydiann's slender shoulder. They stood rooted to the spot, watching the chickens peck and scrap over their dinner, amused at their antics.

Abe came hollering out of the barn, running toward them. "Mamma! Lydiann! You must come have a look-see!"

"What on earth?" Leah hurried to follow him back to the barn, with Lydiann close behind.

Abe made haste, climbing as fast as his short legs would take him, up the ladder to the hayloft. Getting to the top, he was about catching one of many cats. When he'd done so, he

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He picked up by the nape of its neck and pointed to its hind end. He said, "The cat's missing her tail!"

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry at such a sorry

view

But Lydiann spoke up first. "She got it cut off during the harvest year's my guess."

Neither that or the fellow got her on a lark during a pest

time," volunteered Abe.

He flinched. Abe was much too young to be aware of wild things; he was just out of first grade, for goodness' sake! He knew, some of the young men in the community were a few rowdy for her liking. They chose up sides nearly every night during harvest, giving themselves points for snuffing out the farm pests, a practice that kept teenage boys in the neighborhood busy in Gobbler's Knob instead of out there in Lancaster. Each side held its head and tails for points, everything from rats and mice, to hawks and starlings. The group with the most birds was rewarded with a baked-ham dinner.

I "Does it hurt anything for a cat not to have a tail?" asked
lyiliiinn.

I "Makes it hard to keep the flies off her, I'd think," Abe
niki* up, his dark blue eyes twinkling, framed by long thick
twin's,

I "Why did a cat get picked as a pest, I wonder?" Lydiann
Ijficd closely at the spot where the tail had been severed.

I "Too many kitties can be looked on as a problem by some
|till ," Leah answered, wishing to switch to another subject.

Nhc'd known of farmers who drowned or shot their excess
line population, but if she had her way, there'd be a house

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cat or two living inside the Ebersol Cottage. Mamma ik-wi cared much for
indoor pets, though, and neither did most < >i the women folk in the
community, for that matter. Tho days, Dat had better things to do than argue
for or against having a favorite cat, and Leah had decided not to pursue I he
matter.

"This one must've wandered over to the Peachey farm laM fall, ain't?" Abe
said, eyes still wide.

"Sad to say." Leah turned to head toward the ladder, hop- : ing the children
would follow and leave the subject of iIip poor cat be.

"I heard from brother Gid that Smitty asked for a pest hunt." Abe put the cat
down and shuffled across the haymow, "Too many sparrows were diggin'
holes in the straw stacks ;nu| roostin' in there. Them boys sewed some big

ol' blanketn together and trapped the birds inside the stacks. Once they got too hot or stopped breathing, the fellas just went in ami cut off their heads."

Lydiann shrieked. "Mamma, make him stop talkin' 'bout that!"

Leah waited for Abe to bound down from the ladder, then placed a firm but gentle hand on his head. She stroked his blond hair, the color of the straw stacks he'd just described, "Best not be wishin' your youth away, young man," she said, "There's plenty of time for goin' on a lark with the boys." j

"I s'pose" was all he said, and they headed back outside. I

Lydiann tugged on her brother's black suspenders. "Looker up there," she said, pointing at the sky. "Now that's a sighl worth talking'bout." : : , :

And it surely was. Leah noticed sunbeams threading a |

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I !275 O a c r i f i c e

^Blivviiy through a wispy patch of clouds, thankful for ^Hlmiii's keen interest in the more pleasant side of nature. ^m, dl course, was all boy with an ongoing appetite for food ^H otherwise and far louder than any of Abram's daughters ^Ki ever been, full of pep and broad grins. He was always ^hly eager to find the first bumblebees come spring, which ^Btlil il was finally time to shed shoes and run barefoot. He P> loved to take his fishing pole to the nearby creek or I ukbird Pond, sometimes joined by both Gid and Dat, but ntly -Leah knew this all too well taking off to his favor-

"> (ishing hole without ever telling a soul where he was

Im itiled.

I iisi now he looked downright ornery with his front tooth HbiMiig a true disheveled schoolboy with cropped hair. Him< cly, though, did Abe ever wear the straw hat expected H In1 worn by all men and boys starting at age two. Hat or H{, he's ever so dear, she thought, wishing Mamma might Hive lived to see this day. These precious beautiful children K-ic having the best

time of their young lives, soaking up Hlumertime. % I (iod doeth all things well. . . .

I She and Lydiann headed into the house. Without being Hid, Lydiann scrubbed her hands, and then set the table Hlile Leah took the roasted chicken, stuffed with bread dressBH> out of the oven.

I ' Thinking again of Mamma, she asked Lydiann if she'd like H) lake a long walk after dinner. Bobbing her blond head, wilhinn said she would. Abe would be going over to Smithy Bid's grandfather's place with Dat this afternoon because Mlil'hiiis Byler, Miriam Peachey's father, needed a hand with

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transplanting young tobacco plants into the field. Abe especially liked to go to "Dawdi Byler's," as Gid encouraged him to address the older gentleman, since young Abe got a kii I* out of hearing both Gid and Gid's grandfather play their hai monicas together.

After dishes were washed and dried, she and Lydiniui made their way down the long lane toward the road, heading past the Peachey farm, clear out to the turnoff to the Kiiul'l

mans

Down the road a ways, they turned and climbed over n vine-filled ditch and then up a slight embankment, heading to the Amish cemetery protected by giant shade trees.

"Dat's parents are buried here somewhere," Leah s;iiil softly.

"They passed on before I was born, ain't?"

She nodded, looking down at Lydiann. "You would've loved Dawdi and Mammi Ebersol ... a lot."

"What were they like?" tj

"Dawdi was kind and fun loving, yet he had his own ideaft I guess you could say."

"Bullheaded, ya mean?" Lydiann surprised her by saying. ., ' "Ach, that doesn't become you, child."

"Es dutt mix leed." Lydiann hung her head.

"You best be sorry," Leah was quick to say, reminding lu-i self of Mamma, who had never approved of her daughiir. speaking out of turn, calling folk names.

"Mammi Ebersol was sweet as cherry pie . . . never said ;in unkind word 'bout anyone. Not her whole life."

"I could be that sweet even as honey," Lydiann said, looking up at her with innocent, yet spirited eyes.

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M]nh, (hat you can certainly be." When you want to, she itmiiyhi.

Wil h that Lydiann reached for her hand, and they walked lict u while amidst the headstones and trees. Leah was aware, < H ii'0 ii^ain, of the birds' exhilarating song. "Did you ever hear iliH verse from the Good Book? 'The flowers appear on the t-iiilh) the time of the singing of birds is come . . .?'" > '

"Can't say I have. Where'd you hear it?"

"Miimma told it to me once. She loved to listen to the Ii||i.U, 'specially early in the morning."

I ,y (.Harm's eyes suddenly looked bluer. "What else did Miiinmn love?"

"T'liar's easy." She turned and knelt down in the soft
ntrlhind grass. "She loved you. I wish you could remember
I" i ranryin' you here and there, talkin' to you in Dutch and
I n^lltih both, hopin' you'd grow up to respect the land and
li i i'ii (or the song of nature all round you."

"Aunt Lizzie does that, too, ain't so?" . :r

"Maybe more than all of us." ;' i;:

"liven more thafi Mamma did?"

She hugged Lydiann close. "Each sister had certain things
"lie enjoyed about God's green earth. For Mamma it was the
I>ii(In and the way the sky could paint itself all kinds of colors.
"lie saw the Lord God clearly in all of His creation, just as
H|lhi Lizzie does. Lizzie especially likes trampin1 through the
^lock up behind the house where Hannah and Gid live
w."

H "That's awful gut of Aunt Lizzie, givin' up her house and
HfiVing in with Dawdi."

m "I should say, but it's the way of the People, ya know." She

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rose and looked around, wishing she could walk straigbi in Mamma's grave,
without getting lost as she had the previmn time. It had been months since

her last visit, as she had rejected the inclination to visit the graveyard during the front and cold of winter such a severe time to think of do; 1 rent Mamma lying cold in the ground. She was ever so glad that six feet under wasn't the end of things. According to Aunt Lizzie, Mamma's spirit was with the Lord Jesus. Her body was simply the unique shell of her, housing her spirit.

Leah located the small white marker with the few words etched in its stone:

Ida Brenneman Ebersol B. September 2, 1904 D. December 27, 1949

"Will we ever see Mamma again?" Lydiann asked.

Leah was a bit taken aback by Lydiann's question. Truly, she did not wish to step on Dad's toes, because Lydiann was his daughter. "Jah, I happen to believe we will someday," Leah said hesitantly, longing to share the eternal truth as she understood it.

"But Dad says it's up to the Lord God on Judgment Day whether we go to heaven or to the bad place," Lydiann spoke up. "He says we can't know if we're saved just yet."

For sure, just as all the brethren were, Dad was adamant about that Day of Days being the first and only time a person would know where he or she was to spend eternity. Still, Leah knew there were some who believed differently amongst the People, as she did. Silent believers, Aunt Lizzie liked to call them. ., .., ...; ,. >; : ,: : ' / ' : ., :

" ' .. . ' !. 278 ' '. 279

Leah

I ! \w;ys remember this, Lydiann the Lord Jesus came as

Leah <\ in give us life. And not only while we're alive here on

Leah In heaven, too."

I "Tor certain, Mamma?" Lydiann asked, eyes wide with the
ImiiiK.

I "Sure as God's love . . . that's the honest truth."

I I ydliinn seemed satisfied and turned to scamper around
|i < nuTery, peering down at the small markers, reading the
jiiM. i nnd dates aloud in Pennsylvania Dutch.

I N k'iinwhile, Leah sat beside her mother's grave. We all miss
in I Mamma, she thought. Except for Dat, I daresay I miss you
w\t of all. : "::::' ' :

I I he wild ferns growing close to the road were nearly li! It'-deep as Leah
and Lydiann walked leisurely home from li< i t'inetery. Leah pointed out
one bird after another and B'llnw buttercups growing in clusters with no
rhyme or realm *

I "Why do ya think the Lord God made such perty colors Ivc-iy place?"
asked Lydiann.

I "Well, just think of all the different colors of people there p red and
yellow, black and white . . . we're all precious inp sight."

I "That's the song Mary Ruth sings to me, ain't so?" I Leah nodded. She'd
heard Mamma singing "Jesus Loves jne Little Children," too, but Lydiann
couldn't have rememli'iril since she was only two when Mamma died. Mary
Ruth, lili I he other hand, had sung it all the time to Lydiann and

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Carl Nolt when he was little. Here lately Mary Ruth had been saying she thought it was a shame young Carl and Lydiann hadn't gotten acquainted as playmates, since they were neighbors and all, but truth was, Dat had no interest in either Lydiann or Abe rubbing shoulders much with Englishes, When all was said and done, Mennonites surely were English[^] ers, at least in Dat's book. Preacher Yoder's, too.

Thinking about the highly revered minister, she recoiled he hadn't been able to attend Preaching service several time* in a row. Word had it he was suffering from a bad heart thul, and some serious problems with asthma, which she guessed only worsened his heart ailment.

She and Lydiann had been walking for a while, working up a sweat, when Lydiann began to count the tiny white moths that fluttered here and there. Enjoying the sun ami warm breeze, Leah happened to look off to the north and, In and behold, if she didn't spy Dr. Schwartz's automobile parka I in the field just down from Peachey's property.

Curious, she strained to see, but what she saw startled her so much she stopped in her tracks. Why's he kneeling in tht< grass . . , near that little mound of dirt? she wondered, recalling the day she and Jonas had stumbled upon the peculiar plot.

"What're we stoppin' for?" asked Lydiann.

Promptly Leah started walking again, lest her younjj charge continue to ask questions or, worse, realize who wai over there tending a grave with hand clippers and ask to go and talk to her Dokder.

"Come along, now." She picked up the pace. "You and I best be getting home for milkin'." She pointed out the Kaull mans' farm on the left side of the road, hoping to distract

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Id1.1mi from whatever was going on over on the right. She

It (< vded, or thought she had, saying they ought to go visit
nil hi11 ;md Luke here before too long, down near Ninepoints,
mvw \\w couple had built themselves a nice new house with
Htil y i il room for their growing family of young sons.

I Thankfully they were nearing home when Lydiann piped
m, "I lv.it was our doctor in the field, jah?"

I i cull didn't say it was or wasn't; she simply hurried up the
Iru1 lending to the barnyard.

I When they approached the house, Lydiann asked again.

I "Dr. Schwartz owns that field" was all Leah cared to say.

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JTTannah must've wanted to talk to Leah in the worst way, because she
followed her up to the outhouse. "I know sonic thing 'bout Mary Ruth, but
you can't tell a soul," she sniil, hurrying to keep step.

Leah had made several promises in her life that had owl her dearly, so she
was rather hesitant for Hannah to say more "Happy news, I hope?"

Hannah's face shone with the secret. "You'll be so sin prised, I'm thinkin' . . .
and jah, it's right happy. Wann,i guess?" !

"I'm afraid I'm too tired for that." I

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"Ach, don't go spoilin' my fun." Hannah looked hurt. \ Leah couldn't have that. "I do want to hear what's on your;

mind. It's just, well . . . I'm not so interested in hearsay, yn know."

With a most sincere smile on her face, Hannah said, "I 'lilt came straight from the horse's mouth, so ya don't have in worry none." She stopped to bend down and pull a weed oui

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hum lift ween her toes. "Mary Ruth must've forgiven the EngIlili driver." \Vlu>!" H| "You know . . . the young man who hit and killed Elias

I Iui'un."

H Hubert Schwartz? Leah suddenly felt tense.

H "She's seein' the doctor's son, that young minister she and

HU*tml preach in Quarryville years back, remember?"

H "Arc you certain of this?" She knew she must sound like

Brother hen talking so straight, but, if true, this was inter-

H:|mk news!

Hj "Mary Ruth told me . . . and agreed only you could know,

H i V,i know, if Robert Schwartz should end up marry in' our

Hpi i. well, she could be a schoolteacher and a preacher's wife

Him day. Now, don't that beat all?"

H Actually, Leah was somewhat startled at Hannah's appar-

Hi riiihusiasm. "I didn't think you cared two cents 'bout

Hi'imonite beliefs. So ... why are you happy?"

H "After Elias died so young and all, I'm awful glad Mary

Hh!i". not grievirfrg anymore," Hannah said. "She's lookin'

Hcik! to her future."

H "The doctor and his wife are fine folk," Leah said. "I

HnuKI hope their older son is just as nice, 'specially if he's a

Bi'idier. But can you imagine him falling for an Amish girl?"

"Well, she ain't so Amish anymore."

"|ah, 'tis true." Leah couldn't help but think how odd it wmk that another one of the doctor's sons had fallen for a Plain

"Mary Ruth says Robert's completed his Bible studies in wynia and has been offered a part-time job at the Quarry-

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ville church. I guess he'll fill in for the head pastor at tinicn and teach Sunday school some, too. Mary Ruth will sec him plenty . . . gut enough reason to attend services." To this I Inn nah laughed softly.

"I wonder if she realizes what might be required of her if they were to, well . . . marry," Leah said.

"I s'pose that remains to be seen. But for now she's all smiles. For sure and for certain."

Leah pondered the news. If Mary Ruth continued to see Robert, more than likely she'd never return to join the Amish church. That would be awful disappointed over that. Maninm, on the other hand, wouldn't care one bit up in heaven, hell then again, a crush wasn't much to worry about, was it?

Robert sat behind the wheel, waiting for the gas station attendant to wash and dry the car's front and rear window. He made some quick notes for his upcoming sermon, and when the time came to pay the bill for the gasoline, he dug into his pants pocket for the required cash while the attendant stood patiently. !

On the ride home, his thoughts turned to Mary Rnili Ebersol, the young lady he was presently dating. It was she who had once loved and lost Elias Stoltzfus, the boy he had accidentally struck and killed nearly seven years ago. Though trusting the Lord for victory over his intense struggle, in all truth, recurring nightmares of the accident continued to haunt him. To think he had fallen hard for young Elins'iri intended, a homegrown Old Order Amish girl who'd converted to the Mennonite church of her own volition. Yet still

association with her, pleasant and even exciting as it was,

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and him to have to face the catastrophe yet again. In reflecting his thoughts to his sermon outline, Robert read the Lord's own Sermon on the Mount, taking comfort in its promises. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

^HI rih's bare feet took her across the cornfield to the Peach-

^B l u i i s c. Dat, Lydiann, and Abe had all gone fishing, and

^Hi N'Hiio unexpected hours to herself, she had a hankering

^Hti'i- Miriam today. She felt nearly carefree enough to skip

^My, i he way.

^Hj When Miriam saw her from the porch swing, she called

H, "Hullo, Leah!"

^M "Wie geht's?" she asked, happy to see Miriam looking so

Hi

^M "i Mi, I'm fair to middlin'. Come sit with me here on the ^li).;" Miriam slid over to make room. "It's awful pleasant ^wty, but this weather won't last. The heat of June is just ^lul the bend. We'll be tryin' to escape the sun in a few lib." ,

^B "And the mosquitoes will be out in full force." .-.. ^M "I low are your little ones, Leah?"

^m She smiled. "They're sweet as strawberry jam." Seemed

Bftryone considered Lydiann and Abe hers now. Too soon,

^iLIKh, they'd be itching to try out their wings and fly, to

"iiU" I heir own families; it was the way God set things in

km it ion for humankind. Leah wasn't sure where she'd live or

vvliill she'd do once that time came, though it could be she'd

^id up living in the Dawdi Haus with Aunt Lizzie once

^wili John passed on. But since no one but the Lord God

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knew the end from the beginning, there was no need to worry over the future.

She remembered, quite unexpectedly, Mamma saying I said something to Hannah, especially when the twins were younger. Even Aunt Lizzie liked to point out that "Worry instead of trustin' just ain't the way of God's children." I sometimes wished she could be consistently cheerful, like happy-go-lucky Lizzie. Someday I will be . . . if I live long enough,

"What can I do for ya?" Miriam asked.

"I'm curious 'bout one of Mamma's old recipes. It's not written down anywhere, since Mamma knew it by heart, I thought she's not here and . . ."

Miriam glanced at her and gripped her hand. "Aw, honey, You miss her, of course ya do. We all miss Ida so."

She hadn't come here just to ask about a recipe, nor to get sympathy either one. Truth was, she enjoyed talking to Miriam, and though she saw her several times a week in the city and at church twice a month, there were certain times when Leah felt she simply needed to look into Miriam's countenance, and see and know the understanding Mamma had always found there.

"Which recipe are ya thinkin' of?" asked Miriam.

"Mamma's pineapple upside-down cake. I can't seem to remember how much of the shortening, baking powder, and vanilla. All the pinches of this and that tend to get stuck in my head."

"Seems to me that happens to all of us at one time or another. Come inside. I'll try to write it down so you'll have

it.'

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"Thank you." She followed her into the big spotless kitchen. Hearing her to get a pad of paper and pen, Leah felt suddenly warm inside, most pleasantly so.

Having this special ^Bc in her possession would be yet another connection to

Hltllil.

H\l precisely that moment she realized why Mamma ^f'vt1 risked disobeying, keeping back the forbidden letter ^Sndie. It's about losing and trying desperately to hold on, she Hght:.

^Kvci) all these years later, she felt almost too glad to have

^Oyi'd the evidence, lest Dat, the preachers, or the bishop

^gotten wind of it and thought less of Mamma than she

>\-<-J. Truly, coming to visit Miriam this day was one of

l ".i things Leah could've done for both herself and her

itiiiioiy of Mamma.

liven the meadowlarks sang more sweetly as she accepted ^^fiko recipe from Miriam and hugged her good-bye, headH)nr< across the cornfield toward home.

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IVlary Ruth insisted on helping Robert's mother sci ill table for the evening meal. "You mustn't treat me like m_ guest," she told Lorraine as they moved about the table, pLu ing linen napkins and silverware in their proper places.

"Since you're Robert's steady girlfriend, you're nearly lain ily," Lorraine replied, smiling across the table.

Robert strolled into the dining room. "What's this wliLm pering I hear?"
Mary Ruth caught his flirtatious wink. \

Dr. Schwartz came in and stood behind his chair ai iliih head of the table.
"Are we ready for supper, dear?" 1

Lorraine's rosy cheeks seemed brighter than usual. "PK-iwe j be seated . . .
and you, too, Mary Ruth. I can manage jusH fine." 1

Mary Ruth sat on one side of the table with RoluTSf directly across from
her. Having enjoyed one other fine spiniifj at this grand old house, Mary
Ruth knew what to expect. The ! lovely lace tablecloth reminded her once
again that six.1 hml turned fancy rather quickly following Elias's death so
lonn ago now it seemed. Never had she questioned her chosen

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(filing profession, even though she knew it aggrieved her ' ulici no end; that,
and the fact she'd abandoned the People.

mpiisingly the tension had lessened somewhat over the

in:., and for this she was grateful. She could come and go as

i ir pk-ased at the Ebersol Cottage, thanks in part to Leah and

iiui Lizzie. Maybe seeing Lydiann and Abe grow up, having

In ilr ones around again, had prompted Dat to be more flexi-

I li Maybe, too, God was at work in his heart. This, she

1'iiycil lor daily.

"I lore we are," Lorraine said, carrying a tray of roasted

Iih ken surrounded by an array of cooked vegetables ..mi. his, cauliflower,
broccoli, and new potatoes. She disapl" in-il again and returned with a

Waldorf salad and homein Ir applesauce sprinkled generously with cinnamon.

' 'nee his wife was seated, Henry looked to Robert for the I.I.:.MI4J. "Son?"

Robert bowed his head, as did the others. "Thank you,

I .nil, for these bountiful blessings laid out here before us. I'llless the hands that prepared the food, and make us ever iiiiiulliil of your lq^e and grace, and your suffering and death

mi ilie cross for our sins. In Jesus' precious name. Amen." "Thank you, Robert," Lorraine said, looking at her son

' nil obvious affection. Then she directed Henry to pass the

l-ni;i- platter to Mary Ruth.

The matching silver candlesticks with twinkling white

i. 11 k> rs graced the meal, as well as the evening, and by the time

I1 if dessert was served, Mary Ruth felt almost too full, but I'lau-liil for this time spent with Robert's parents.

Sadly Henry and Lorraine had slim hope of having good li-llowship with their younger son. Robert had shared that

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they scarcely ever heard from Derek. Mary Ruth found rhir, n > be distressing, especially because it was clear how fond RoU u was of his parents. Just then she wondered if the opporlunii v would ever present itself for her to tell Robert what she knew of Derek his illicit relationship with Sadie. Too soon yet, slut decided. a

When it came time to say their good-byes, Robert offered to walk with her over to the Notts' house. On the way, HI asked, "What do you plan to do with yourself all summer?" M

"Oh, I have a few ideas." She told him how she had Ix'civ lending a hand in Leah's vegetable garden. "And on washdiiy, I help her heat up the water and whatnot. Of course, I do enjoy my little sister and brother, as well, so spending time with them means Leah can rest once in a while."

"I like the sound of this," he said, reaching for her hand. "Have yourself a good time with Leah . . . dear sister of yours,"

"Do you pity her, Robert?"

"I didn't say that."

"I just thought . . . well, maybe I heard it in your voice,"

He paused. "Your sister's an example for us all. A measure of a person's character is what's done in run-of-the-mill daily life, when no one is watching."

"Sounds like you could write that into one of your sci fictions."

"I just might."

She was aware of the sound of their shoes on the road. He said no more.

At last Robert spoke again. "In your opinion, how did it happen that Jonas Mast left Leah behind, knowing that she is?"

"He was a fool, that's how." The words flew from her lips,

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Chapter C Sacrifice

"Hi M . . ." She caught herself. I mustn't say such things. It's a hint coming of me, she thought. "I guess when it comes to my father and Abe, I have to say I have a tendency to be out of line. I'm very sorry."

1 It wasn't until later, after she'd said good night and was j <led into bed, that it dawned on her how she must have | "le across to Robert. Still, she felt he must surely know her I 11 enough to understand she wasn't as docile as some young | men, though she was trying to mellow ... on a day-by-day j i '-.Is, with the Lord's help.

I Icr biggest struggle was thinking ahead to how things miirhi work out if Robert kept looking at her the way he tlli I , . . if he happened to ask her to marry him someday. Just Iimw would such a thing affect her relationship with her family' Would they turn their backs on her, the way they had Shi Ik'? She knew they would never shun her, but she was iihnst sure the wedge between her and Dat would grow.

<.)n top of that, sometimes she had second thoughts about I1"licit because of his younger brother, Derek, and what she I- iirw of his loo\$e morals. What kind of boy would do such a

111 ii ijj; to an innocent girl that is, if Sadie had been innocent. ' 'uly the Lord knew such things. Even so, the more time she i"-nr with Robert and the Schwartz family, the more Mary I' 111 li found herself pondering these things.

The day after her evening with the Schwartzes, Mary 'nth was delighted to see Hannah standing at the front door I i he Nolts' house. Before her sister could knock, Mary Ruth

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scurried to the screen door and opened it wide. "Aw, where are the little ones?" she asked, faintly disappointed Hnminli hadn't brought her children.

Hannah smiled a bit wearily and stepped inside. "I I (ink Aunt Lizzie up on her offer to stay with the girls awhile."

"Some grown-up talk should help some." Mary Rueh understood the amount of energy it took keeping up with youngsters. "It's draining being

round children all day, although I must say I enjoy being a teacher as much as I thought I would."

Hannah smiled as they sat at Dottie's kitchen table. "Yon look awful gut, sister. I didn't want to come over too six hi, not with school just out 'n' all. Thought you might need ill week or so to catch your breath, prob'ly." I

"That's considerate of you, but I'm always glad to see you, "I

Mary Ruth poured lemonade for them both and setilnjl into their contented chitchat. "How's Lizzie's cottage in ih | woods working out for the four of you?" she asked. I

"Just fine for now, but" and here Hannah paused l "there's gonna be five of us in a little while."

"Another baby to love! How wonderful."

Hannah's face clouded over. "Come December," she sniil, "My next baby's due at Christmas, same as young Abe's billh I day."

Mary Ruth reached over and squeezed her hand. "Now, you mustn't worry. You're many years younger than Mai in mi was with Abe, and the circumstances of his birth were highly unusual."

"Poor Mamma," Hannah whispered, sniffing. "She lovciil Abe ever so much." .: .

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H "She loved us all." Mary Ruth observed Hannah, wonderHg if this was the right time to say more. They fell silent for

moment, and then she said, "And . . . Mamma loved the Hinl Jesus, too. She opened her heart wide to His love and Bt'j.;iveness."

I Waiting to continue, she hoped Hannah might not turn Hviy. Thankfully this time she did not get up and leave the Hihle as she often did when Mary Ruth spoke either of jHmma's or her own spiritual perspective. "The decision to Hulk with Jesus is not so much a mental one as it is a yielding Hf ihe heart ... to God's plan for our lives." She thought she Hll^ht break down with emotion, so strongly she felt aboutits.

Hannah bobbed her head and fought her own tears. "I Bl h to goodness I'd asked Mamma certain things before she tfd," she admitted. "I waited much too long."

I Mary Ruth's heart was tender toward her. "I had a private ilk with Mamma not too long before she died . . . after Dat Hicked me out of the house. She said she, too, was a believer, fiough a silent oi^e, following Jesus and living out her days as Best she could, considering the Ordnung . . . and Dat." W "Mamma?"

! "Jah, and it's easy to see, too, isn't it? She had such a long'uffcring, joyful way 'bout her, ya know. Mamma could forgive ,ii the drop of a hat; a sure sign of her deep faith, I'd have to.ny."

"I miss her terribly." Hannah looked across the table and ICiil the window beyond. For the longest time she sat there in ill as could be; then she whispered, "I've always been frightlined of death. ... Always."

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"Oh, sister. Truly, there's no need to be." She rose :iml hurried to Hannah's side. Stroking her back, she said, "When she was nearing the end, Mamma wasn't afraid to pass owi Jordan's banks to Glory. Leah said as much."

"Jah, I remember hearing that." Hannah sighed. "Bui when Mammi Ebersol died and we were just thirteen, hon estly that was 'bout all I could think of day in, day out. Such a worry wart I was then."

"And not now?"

Hannah smiled through tears, hugging her hard. "Sun-, I worry too much. Gid, bless his heart; he's tryin' to help mr with that."

"Smithy Gid's a fine man. I see it clearly in his eyes when | he looks at you and your girls." I

Hannah nodded in agreement. "You just don't know limv wonderful-gut he is to me. Being his wife, I've experience I ;i lightness, an odd sort of peace."

"Then we're both happy, seems to me."

"Very happy," Hannah echoed.

"Who would have guessed I'd end up being courted by a Mennonite preacher a doctor's son, at that."

"Your eyes sparkle with this path you've chosen, M;uy Ruth. Truly, I'd always hoped you'd come back and be Amish with me, but it seems you've found something more befit in' you."

She smiled, thinking how dear it was of Hannah to s;iy such a thing; despite their very different lives, her twin's hc;n i was still warm toward her. "It's a good thing I didn't join church with you and then left, or we wouldn't be enjoying

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!i close fellowship today." She got up and poured more miuide for them.

I "I \) you ever think of our big sister?" Hannah asked. I "11h, every day."

"Honestly, I worry 'bout Leah, having lost her close-in-age i u?r tor life."

Mary Ruth sipped her lemonade. "I can't imagine us grow-

M| old and not knowing something about her. It's painful to hsidcr."

"I wonder if she has more than the one child we'd heard

I"- was expecting . . . back years ago."

Mary Ruth often wondered the same. "Let's hope she has houseful by now. For our sister's sake Jonas's too being in oil from family as they are."

h "Speakin' of wee ones, I best be thinkin' of returning Blur here perty soon. Lizzie's got her hands full." I "So does Leah," Mary Ruth said. "I'm going to help her as

i<li as I can this summer. Such a cute little sister and IuiIht we have. God was so good to Dat, don't you agree?" I i lannah wore brighter smile now. "Such joy they bring I our wounded sister, too."

I "The children do seem to comfort her. Leah's been known

I ki'cp things bottled up inside her, ya know."

I She followed Hannah through the back door and outside,

I (HKc missing her horse-and-buggy days as Hannah got

ti.i-H situated into Gid's fine gray family carriage. "The Lord

m wiili you," she called.

I "Anil with you!" came the familiar reply.

I Mary Ruth was grateful for her sister's unexpected recep-

Ivi'iess to her words today. She would continue sowing seeds

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of the gospel into Hannah's precious heart. "Fertile soil," n Robert liked to say.

Robert. He had secretly admired her long before they ever actually gone on a real date. Then he had patiently waited to court her while she finished up her teaching certificate. Because he had been so patient, she had been able to focus on her studies, made possible, in the long run, by Ian nah, who'd helped her out of a financial bind, surprising her with a secret hankie savings fund a humbling gift, to say the least. Because of this gesture of kindness, Mary Ruth had been able to complete her college education with only a few dollars boarding with the Nolts and working for them several evenings a week, as well as waiting on tables at a Strasburg restaurant on the weekend. Hannah, in the end, had refused to talk of repayment.

The Lord had worked all things together for good, giving Mary Ruth the desire of her heart, teaching young children the passion of her heart, really. She hoped to continue at the rural elementary school for English children. Her first calling, for now. ;

She stood in the yard, giving Hannah one long wave as the horse pulled the buggy out of their lane and onto the row road.

Hannah's fingertips felt numb from picking, shelling, ; it was the day following her visit to Mary Ruth. Slit, Leah, and Lydiann would be doing the same again tomorrow while Aunt Lizzie again kept a watchful eye on Hannah.

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Chapter 297

"Peas took time and tallied up ever so slowly, but I won't irk, Though tedious, meant time spent with her sisters. I Now (that evening had come, she and Gid stood alone on the porch, looking up at the stars. "Tis the best time of the tiny . . . right now," he whispered in her ear. "Just the two of us. The way it all started out, ain't?" While the girls sound asleep, she was eager for his warm kisses and fervent kisses. But he seemed to want to talk, Gid was willing to listen. "Just so ya know, our horse has itchy tingles, and we'll have to borrow one of Abram's for a

tip."

I Slu' breathed in the smell of the night as she leaned lust the porch rail, Gid's arm around her waist. "Hope you

I I);ii can cure it soon enough."

[" The disease is right contagious, so we'll have to isolate U one horse, for sure. 'Tis best to let the infection run its Me, though."

I "Isn't there something you can do?" she asked.

1

I "Penicillin shots will only lengthen the disease, but Mum's goin' to give his drivin' horses shots to prevent it." uj continued, talking of making hay all day and how he, tt, and Sam Ebersol would be working together tomorrow. lip is best stayin' with shodding horses, I'm a-thinkin'. It th harder and harder for him to make hay or fill silo every In i hut goes by. I'm just glad to be able to help him. Sam is,i."

"I'm afraid the same goes for Dat."

(iid nodded. "'Cept the difference 'tween my father and UFN is Abram's battlin' hard growing old . . . wants to stay as yiijj; as he can for Lydiann and Abe's sake, prob'ly."

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"I see the fight in him, too."

"On the other hand, my pop's back keeps goin' oni mi him. Don't know how much longer he'll be able to do lii blacksmithing duties, really."

"What'll happen then?" She'd worried some about this > .li and on the past year.

"Right now, Sam is gut 'bout helping, so let's not ui> that bridge 'fore we have to, dear."

Her concerns had run away with her yet again. No n<< .1 to get Gid thinking too hard on that the People took cm of their own. Mamma would have said that when the tim> came, the Lord God heavenly Father would give them tin strength and the grace they needed just as it had been li n Aunt Lizzie tending to Dawdi John and Leah caring so Im ingly for Lydiann and Abe. She hoped it was true.

"You all right, Hannah?"

"Just thinkin', is all." She leaned against Gid's sturdy :11m

"Counting your blessings, jah?"

She nodded, not wanting her husband to wonder if ht 1 fears were taking her over once again. "Ever so many blew* ings," she managed to say. . . , ,

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Jure is wet for July," Dawdi John said at midday. Leah, along

111) Lydiann and Abe, sat taking a quick breather in Dawdi's

out room.

I "It's July the twelfth," insisted Abe.

I "What's the date matter?" Lydiann piped up.

"Matters to me," said Abe.

"Goodness," said Leah. "Aren't you lippy today."

I ler boy nodded. "I'm getting myself ready for school here die too long, fixin' to surprise my teacher."

"How's that?" Dawdi asked.

E" 'Cause I can make heads 'n' tails of the calendar," Abe plied. Leah ruffled his hair, taken once again by Abe's clever marks. "That's not all she'll be pleased 'bout, I daresay. m've been workin' your arithmetic this summer . . . with me help from Lydiann and Dat."

i Dawdi nodded his head, twitching his nose. "Right smart ytt both are. Take after your mamma."

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Abe's eyes lit up. "Mamma Leah?"

Dawdi leaned back with laughter. "Well, now, she's n bright one, too."

Lydiann was too quiet, Leah happened to notice. "Every thing all right, Lyddie?"

She shook her head, her eyes filling with tears.

"Well, now, honey, what's wrong?" Dawdi asked.

"I ... can't remember what my first mamma looked liki no more."

Abe was quick to speak. "Me neither, Lyddie. But tluii don't mean I have to go 'n' cry 'bout it."

"Aw, now, Abe . . . don't act so," Dawdi John said. "Conn here and sit on my knee." He put down his cane and A In hopped up on his lap. "Let me tell you 'bout your mother who birthed ya."

"Your daughter, ain't?" Abe said.

Dawdi nodded. "She had the prettiest blue eyes I ever did" see. Just look at your sister over there; she has your mother's* eyes."

"What did I get of Mamma's?"

Somewhat comically, Dawdi scrutinized Abe. "Let nu see . . ." He pulled on his long beard, frowning; then a smile spread across his wrinkled face. "I know. You have her spunk, I see it in your eyes awful mischievous they are. And " f

"It's in his voice, too." Lydiann smiled at her brother. i

"And what else?" Abe asked. i

Leah felt compelled to speak up. "If ya ask me, you boih have Mamma's pretty hair. Light as the color of wheat , , , : even blonder than your aunt " She almost said "Sadie" Imt stopped herself.

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I "WhiiC were you gonna say?" asked Abe.

I I >;iwili must have surmised her thoughts and intervened.

rlinr nrc plenty-a light-headed relatives in the family,

lini: man."

I "'in Abe's got Mamma's hair and eyes and her spunk,"

Idlimn said, looking right at her brother. "That oughta keep

I i|uiet for now."

I I rah had to smile. Ach, how they love to bicker. Just as she

nil Sadie had as girls; same as Hannah and Mary Ruth, too.

iii'v'/I grow out of it one day, she thought.

I I)awdi began to tell a humorous story from his boyhood,
Ill'kly getting the children's attention by describing how
in iy ;ind muddy it had been one long-ago summer. "My boot
It nick on the mule road over in Hickory Hollow, where I
|. I in an old farmhouse with my parents, your young
liniiiiii, Aunt Lizzie, and a whole bunch of your great-aunts
In I] neat-uncles. Well, I pulled and pulled and could not get
Iy I mot out."

I I ydiann grinned from ear to ear. "What'd ya do, Dawdi?"
I "I decided I'd Best just pull my foot out and leave my boot
li. k i here."

I "You did, really?" Abe said.

I "Jah, and I walked all the way down the road in the mud
I iIn- well, pumped out some water, and rinsed off my sock
nil loot. And that was that."

I "What happened to your boot?" asked Lydiann.

I "Il stayed right there overnight till we got more rain,
lini li turned the mud into stew . . . and I lugged the boot

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This brought a round of giggles, egging Dawdi on l>

Leah's mind wandered while the storytelling continued, back to early days when she, Sadie, Hannah, and Mary Ruili would sit at their father's knee, listening to him read llw Budget Aunt Lizzie and Mamma, ever near, would sit inched away doing their knitting or crocheting. Now and then, Mamma would make a little sound, and Dat would look I hi way, smile, and return to reading. It was as if they were om nected by a fine and loving thread that wove the family together, night after night, day after day.

How she missed those times! Still, she wouldn't think uf going back, even if she could not with the children needin i her so. Yet if she had to live her youthful days over again, she* might choose to return to autumn hayrides and the snipe hunts she and Jonas, along with all their siblings, enjoyed nh much. Back then she had been the age Lydiann was now; sui h an innocent, happy time.

The best part of those autumns had been the bright blue weather, warm and wistful during the days with a nip to die night air. Once she'd sat all alone out behind the barn in die high meadow just staring at the night sky, gazing at the hir, harvest moon, counting the stars, and wondering about hei future whom she might marry when she grew up ... and how many little ones she and her husband would have one day.

The children's laughter, mingled with Dawdi John's, brought her back to the business at hand. "Best finish cook in1 supper," she said, getting up. '

Lydiann and Abe followed, giving Dawdi a hug bd'mv

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ly It'll. "We'll see ya at the table soon," Lydiann said with BIni'Ihcvous smile. "Mamma and I are makin' a surprise for Wynne."

UmIi lifted her finger to her lips. "Now, Lydiann, don't ail things by sayin' too much."

"Ach, girls can't keep no secrets," Abe spouted off.

Hawdi chuckled and Leah shooed the children toward the (meeting door, back to the main house.

^M Leah glanced out the window, making note of the fine
Hftmcr day as she and the family, except for Aunt Lizzie and
H|wdi John, all sat down to breakfast.

H Immediately following the silent prayer, Abe announced
Ho loudly, "Today's Friday the thirteenth!"

H Dat quickly linked the date to superstition. "So 'tis best to
Hj extra alert and careful, 'least till sundown."

H Mamma would not have approved of Dat saying such a
Hllng, yet he jokesd about it anyway, though he surely knew
Htter. Good thing Aunt Lizzie hadn't joined them for eggs
Hlil pancakes. She would've spoken up but quick, putting an
Hul to the nonsense talk. Lizzie had been cut from the same
Hold as Mamma, and for this Leah was glad.

I Once Dat was finished eating, he left the table for the
Ibnn. It was then Leah told Lydiann and Abe both there was
jj-fiorhing to worry about. "Don't worry yourself about the date.

'We're not so superstitious, really never have been."

Abe looked puzzled, glancing over his shoulder toward the kick door. "But
Dat said " >

lu J2e

"I know what your father said." She was struggling, in it sure how to preserve respect for Dat while teaching the dill dren what she knew to be true what she knew her maininu and Aunt Lizzie would have said. She didn't want to out-; i in I* out discredit her father, but she felt troubled deep in her soul each time Dat talked about such dark things.

Just last week he had suggested the hex doctor come dike a look at Lydiann when she'd gotten bit up by mosquitoes ;iiul welts had come out all over her legs. Had it not been for A mil Lizzie prevailing, Leah would have been at a loss to handle things. Dat, after all, was Lydiann's father. She, on the othei hand, was merely a substitute mother with little say at IininI it seemed so at times like this.

"Do you remember where we're goin' today?" she askt'il Lydiann and Abe, changing the subject as gracefully as piw sible.

"To see the doctor!" Lydiann said merrily. She liked reiving her "ticker checked," as Dr. Schwartz called it when lip listened to the children's hearts with his stethoscope.

"In one hour we must leave," she told them, pointing lor Lydiann to clear the dirty dishes from the table, and thru directing Abe toward the back door to go and offer Dat some help in the barn.

"Dawdi John was mighty happy with our supper surprise last night," Lydiann said, getting up from the table.

Abe smacked his lips. "So was I. Dawdi and Dat boili liked your pineapple upside-down cake, Mamma."

"There's some left for dinner today," Lydiann told him. "Now, how'bout that?" . , , ;

To this Abe went running outside, hollering the happy

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305 O a c r i f i c e

p* lo I);it. Leah stood at the back door and watched him

ulud nil the talk of Friday the thirteenth was past for now.

H "I lose off your feet; it's time to go," Leah called to Abe. Hi* i lidn't want Abe dragging mud into the clean clinic when Hi liildrcn arrived for their checkups. Dr. Schwartz had said Hi i i was no sense waiting till closer to the start of the school H luive their appointments "Things get hectic then," he'd Htil her two weeks ago. Besides that, with news of several Binlisters in the area having contracted the dreaded polio, Hi ohwartz had urged her to bring Abe and Lydiann in for 'II first dose of the new vaccine. Although it was still "I iiiinner, they would get their clean bill of health from a

Ik-;il doctor, as well as prevention against the contagious

ili ' .r.c, before Dat got any more ideas about calling for the

i ivvwnw doctor.

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H I he horse hitched up to the carriage easily, and in no time

I ill they were beaded down the one-mile stretch to the

liu< , "I wonder how much I weigh this year," Abe said, sitIn! ; i<> the left of Leah in the front seat.

I I cnli waited for Lydiann to say something either funny or

He

i""iy, but she was silent in the second seat. Glad for the H i' c, Leah focused on the steady rhythm of the clip-clopping Hi i he horse.

I Soon Lydiann began to hum rather forcefully "Jesus Loves fir," ibe song Mary Ruth had often sung to the children.

"I;or the Bible tells me so . . ." Abe joined in, his voiceHacking. -.; .. -...

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I. 306lO e o e r I y J~- e. w i s

When they came to the part, "Little ones to I Inn belong . . . they are weak. . ." Leah winced, recalling !> -> j tiny Sadie's baby had been at his birth. She hummed iiImuh with the children, hoping to dispel her momentary gloom

Arriving well before the appointment, Leah noli*. I another horse and buggy waiting ahead of them in the Lm. Not knowing who was parked there, she decided, since ii u i j so pretty out, she and the children would just sit in the < n j riage till closer to time to go inside.

Promptly, though, Abe jumped down from the carri;i|M and moseyed over to the other gray buggy. Relaxing in 11 > front seat, she decided not to hinder him from being social ! since it came so naturally to him. She closed her eyes Im > moment.

Next thing she knew, Lydiann had climbed out and urn over to join Abe. With both children standing there chnii' i ing away, she reluctantly got out and tied the horse to il post, then walked slowly to the other buggy.

"Mamma, this here's Mandie and Jake Mast," Lydiann ;,.u.l quickly when she saw her coming.

"Well, hullo . . . children." She was flabbergasted to :.< > Fannie's twins sitting there by themselves.

Mandie explained. "Our mamma's inside . . . has a m;im\ flu."

"Jah, she's been terrible sick." Jake nodded his head as In spoke.

Mandie's blond hair was pure contrast to Jake's dark IumJ and eyes. "We're goin' straight home once Mamma gets In i self some medicine," she said. "'

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"She needs to feel better and right quick," Jake added.

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307a c r i f

e r t f t c e

W^hey don't know of their parents' stand against us Ebersols, Hght I rah, finding it rather curious to be here talking so By wllh Jonas's baby sister and brother. She savored the Hit! moment; these twins would have been her brotherllUtr-iivlaw had she and Jonas married. "'What's your name?" Mandie asked her, blue eyes twin-

"I'm Cousin Leah," she said, not revealing her last name, ml I his is Lydiann and Abe."

"Abe already told us his name." Jake smiled broadly,

* Imi! his white teeth. A wider grin she'd never seen.

I ih's a right perty name," Mandie said. "And . . . you're sin?"

Ik straightened, repeating that she was indeed. They've i heard tell of their eldest brother's first love. Suddenly Jake jumped down out of the carriage. "Let's see .' tn 11 1 am next to you, Lydiann."

"Juke, what on earth are ya doin'?" Mandie scowled from I'liiiiage. "She's a girl, for pity's sake." "She's oyr cousin, for pity's sake!" Jake hollered over his i iK k-r.

"No need to yell, children," Leah found herself chiding in, watching in disbelief as Jake and Lydiann simultanely I iirned themselves around and stood back to back, head !ieiul.

"Tin taller, ain't so, Mamma?" asked Lydiann, staring Ikjlil ahead, holding still as could be.

(Iksorving the childish scene play out before her eyes, she

iniriil on the irony of the unexpected meeting Cousin

Mine inside paying a visit to the doctor for a summer flu;

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the twins out here. "Well, it's hard to say, really . . . but juli, ! s'pose you are. But only by a hair."

To this Lydiann giggled. Jake, on the other hand, lookci) terribly concerned, if not upset.

"See, Jake? I am taller than you!" Lydiann said a bit imi gleefully.

"That can't be," Jake insisted, his hands on his sk-mlcf hips.

"Come along, now," Leah said, turning to go while Ahp and Lydiann said good-bye to their newfound cousins.

"Won'tcha come to Grasshopper Level 'n' visit us?" Juki* asked.

"That'd be fun," Lydiann said, waving.

"See ya later!" called Mandie.

Obviously Abe and Lydiann were quite taken with iln cute twins. When at last they joined Leah, they hurried up the long walk toward the clinic.

Glancing over her shoulder at Cousin Fannies youngsiris, Leah had mixed feelings about the encounter. For as obstinate as the Masts were toward the Ebersols, there was little or un hope they would ever see hide nor hair of Jake and Mamlir again.

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I #t?ith quickened her pace to keep up with Lydiann and Abe, I flight ing in their chatter as the three of them walked down llir road to the schoolhouse this second week of school. Abe Wiii in second grade this year, looking splendid in his lavender ulilii, Mack broadfall trousers, and suspenders. Today, for a nli > > hange, he wore his straw hat firmly on his head. I vili-Hin was pretty as a picture in her green dress and crisp |t|tn 1 apron, her small hair bun hidden beneath her white|Hii|i-i veiling. J*

I i-a11 had been mighty busy sewing several new sets of hthes for each child during the final weeks of August, and ^B hiul volunteered to help clean up the schoolhouse with ^Htr parents in preparation for the start of school, as well. ^B "Won'tcha come back for our school picnic today?" ^Hlhim asked her.

^B "iHease, Mamma," Abe begged, hopping up and down. H["po ya really want me to?" she said, knowing full well the UPwcr.

" 'Course we do!" Abe shouted.

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"The pupils from the school over on Esbenshade Road m* joinin' us today, too," Lydiann said.

"A wunderbaar Picknick!" said Abe.

In her busyness, she'd completely forgotten the comhimui school event. Mandie and Jake Mast attended the olhci school that served the conservative Mennonite and Amiftlt children in the Grasshopper Level area. What fun it would be* for Lydiann and Abe to see their Mast cousins again. "Sine, I'll return at eleven-thirty with the horse and buggy," she s:ili|

"Will ya stay for story time after lunch recess?" Abe asknl, swinging his lunch pail.

"We'll see." She wanted them to enjoy their classmate-s, feel at liberty to make friends, not be too dependent on her.

"Aw, won'tcha, Mamma?" she whined.

"None of the other mothers stay, do they?"

Abe shook his head. "But you ain't like them," he said. "You're younger than most."

"Pettier too." Lydiann reached for her hand and held it tight.

Quickly Leah directed their attention to the various trees, different kinds of birds, and other familiar landmarks along the road. It was a good long walk, but it was a fine way to extend her day with them. They never seemed to tire of her presence, as if they required her more than some children needed their mothers.

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Back home again, Leah canned seven quarts of peaches then made up a large batch of catsup, with help from Li,

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Leah making a sandwich to take back with her to the children

Leah's school, a decisive knock came at the back door. The

children had "sorrowful news to bear" of Preacher Yoder's pass-

ing; "It happened just hours ago." Their longtime minister had

fallen (I of a heart attack.

"We're in need of a new preacher," Aunt Lizzie said as the eleven women watched Smithy Peachey scurry out to the barn to tell the news to Abram and Gid.

"I 'spect we'll be having an ordination service 'fore too li in^," Leah said.

"We best start prayin' for God's will in the selection of a h< w minister," Aunt Lizzie said reverently. "Does Dat ever pray thataway?" asked Leah. "What do ya mean?"

"Does Dat beseech the Lord God heavenly Father for ill vine will in all things the way you do?" The way Mamma iil-ii'd^s did, she thought.

Aunt Lizzie's face brightened at Leah's question. "I believe

11 if Lord is definitely at work in Abram's heart," she replied ulily, yet confidently. "You wait 'n' see. He'll come round to iIn- saving grace."

fc I .izzie's remarks wondered Leah. "I hope you're right 'bout Him," she found herself saying. "Maybe then there won't be B much talk of hex doctors anymore."

p "Oh j ah ... all that white witchcraft talk will fly out the u-iiulow. You'll see."

I .izzie's words went round and round in Leah's head. Even

-i she hitched up the horse and headed back to the little onemi im school for lunch, the words "you'll see" continued to > i ho in her brain.

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Actually, she was glad for a reason to be gone over lh# noon hour, what with plans for the minister's wake no doubt taking shape. Lizzie's far better at such things, she thought Hi she rode down Georgetown Road.

When she arrived, the school yard was bustling with dill* dren, girls eating their sack lunches on the grass, boys eafiny theirs on the merry-go-round.

Lydiann looked awful sad when Leah found her. "Ow Mast cousins didn't come," she said. "All the other puplU did . . .'cept not them."

They must've told their mamma about meeting Lydiann and Abe, Leah decided. Cousin Fannies shunning the youngest Ebt'Tsols through her twins!

Leah had to offer some sort of explanation to distract pi >i Lydiann, though in all truth, a mere girl didn't need to know such spiteful things. "Maybe Jake and Mandie are under ilir weather," she offered as a possible excuse.

"That can't be it," Lydiann piped up. "The teacher snii| their mamma kept them home today."

On purpose . . . in case they might have themselves another good time with Abe and Lydiann, thought Leah. Will this neverend? She was tempted to ride over to the Masts' orchard house and storm up to the back door to give Cousin Fannie a good tongue-lashing. It was one thing to punish the Ebersol grown ups, but this!

Following the news of Preacher Yoder's death, Lizdr promptly hurried across the field to visit Miriam Peachey. They spent a few minutes at the kitchen table making a list of food items necessary for supplying the grieving family; (hen

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If niul Miriam said good-bye and Lizzie ambled back to the BllHC It) prepare roast-beef sandwiches for her father and Ibnim.

I At the noon meal she was mindful to stay out of their hit1 conversation as the two men discussed the Yoder family hki* and the subsequent funeral and burial services. I When they were finished eating, Abram bowed his head li I lit- silent prayer; then she cleared the table and washed in I 11 lied the dishes. That done, she swept the kitchen floor, lii I I hen the back porch and sidewalk. All the while, she LiiUMnplated her earlier exchange with Leah. Was it possible Ipriiin would indeed embrace the Lord as Savior?

Lizzie had on strong indications he was softening, little cracks of light jowly penetrating his gritty soul.

Privately she continued to share with him what she'd innied over the years through time spent on her knees in tnyrr and by reading Scripture. Faith cometh by hearing, and l(ir/n,t; by the word of God. Tenaciously she clung to this pasjifr in Romans whenever Abram became resistant. Yet she |h sure the frequency and the fervency of her witness was I I ing through to him, touching the deep of his heart.

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"Mamma? Are you upset?" Abe asked hours after the pic, sitting next to Leah in the front seat of the carriage as drove them home.

Leah hadn't realized it, but here she was groaning, disturb[the children. She gathered her wits. "I'm all right."

314 1 - lu e o e r I y c-L- e u? i s

Lydiann began to rehash the day. "S'posin' I should lu> upset, too, since our own cousins didn't come to the picnk ,"

Abe shook his little head. "When will we see them nguiii. Mamma?"

Before Leah could answer, Lydiann suggested they iuvilt* Jake and Mandie to Abe's birthday, "come December."

Abe's eyes shone. "Jah, and maybe Christmas dinner,

too!" .' : .-., . ,. : .. .' " ...

; . . : ...' .. --.. .- ..,;:-... - .-. z1 .;-; .;.; ' It

..' ' . w . '*

Late that night, Leah was too fidgety to sleep. So ... 11 > Mast twins had told their mother of meeting Cousin Lculi Oh, to have been a fly on the backseat of the buggy!

She struggled to put into practice what the Scriplnn taught about forgiveness, for the Masts surely needed to l forgiven, didn't they?

Sitting up in bed, she stared into the darkness of Iut, room. She wished she could be at peace with all men tmd' women including kinfolk like Peter and Fannie and flu-If children.

Dear Lord, drive 'my anger far from me, she prayed.

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I lie letter from Sadie to the bishop was a single page long, H^ Ahram's first reaction was to walk away and ignore it. ^Bishop Bontrager, large man that he was, stood near the ^H I ulrr in Abram's own barn, blocking the setting sun's horHhi.il rays from coming through the door. "Go ahead, ^Binn, have a look-see." The bishop pushed the letter into ^Ii.iikIs, apparently eager to hear what Abram made of it. ^Mf'iiirly torn, Abram felt pressured to read his long-lost ^flghlrr's letter. At the same time he was curious to know Hy sIk'VI written in the first place. Walking toward the dooriVtiy, lu- held the page up to the last vestiges of daylight.

I'Vidtry, September 14, 1956

I >r<ir Bishop Bontrager, : '

Greetings from Nappanee, Indiana, where I have been living for eight years.

I am writing to ask your kind permission to return to my family. This would be ever so helpful to me, even necessary at this distressing time. You see, I am a widow as of two weeks

316 H|ll| , . ^/Oetyerly J~^ e u? i s '

1 i;i;i ;.. : ago, due to a silo-building accident in Goshen.

I , Since I am under the Bonn in my home church, I thought

Lu, ; .' it best to contact you directly. 1 hope you might pave the uwv

Bj for this request. It has been a long time since my baptism din/

Hj my leaving, and since then I have been a God-fearing woman

Bl .', and made my peace with the Lord God and with a church hnr

Hi 1

HI ""':",',," in Nappanee, as well as the Millersburg, Ohio, district, whoi' \

W\].... first 1 confessed my sins privately to the ministers. j

1' i

| j|l Will you allow me to make things right with this letter! I i

if,1 | : : want to return home to look into the faces of my dear father,

B . mother, and sisters with the shunning lifted from me.

\ ". Respectfully, A

Hi ' /. "" " ';; Sadie (Ebersol) if

| : Afcrum scarcely knew what to say. Sadie wanted to

I 1 '!. home, wanted to repent. "So much she doesn't know 'I t

I I:!. us," he said. "She has no knowledge of Ida's passing . i

R 'I, , unaware of her little brother."

I . j ;, ' My firstborn . . . a young widow, he thought, pained.

I. ! . Before Abram was fully ready to relinquish the lettci, ili#j

K . i ' ; . bishop reached for it and quickly stuffed it back inl<> <ln 1

I ..': envelope. "I have half a mind to say she ought not mum.':

I Simply puttin' words on a page is not enough for me to it

I a shunned woman the go-ahead to come home."

I'1.'!- :.' Abram's heart sank. "Then, ya must not believe sheV m

If); cere?"

P I

i "Sincerely wrong, she is. Your eldest ain't above the (, >ul

.' nung, though she might think so. If she wants to live vvlfb

, you and Leah and the rest of the family, she'll have to nlfc r n kneeling
repentance before the entire membership. Noil mi less." The bishop tapped
the envelope on the palm of hi:. < il

317a c r I f

acriti.ee

>\ luiiul. "If she should be stupid enough to make an "I1' .il returning
without takin' the proper steps, you and ! ill he shunned, too."

'i/j;h(. coming and going, Abram thought, realizing he was

plnting the same things Ida used to say and Lizzie

I l now. It made little sense to slap the Bann on a family

I uuse they had a shunned relative, and one obviously I, But he kept his
opinion to himself, not wanting to

if he had an opportunity to see his daughter and possibly
'.' irrandchildren. What an awful long time had passed
.idie had left home, and now she was living in Indiana.
! iily Jonas couldn't make it as a carpenter in Ohio.

1111 wasn't too surprised at that; not with the bishops out ' nid here
frowning hard on young men who thumbed ii noses at farming. Seems
mighty English to do otherwise, he

M)!lll',

Hi 11 now Jonas had been killed building a silo. Such risky,
i' dangerous work anybody knew that. Especially for a
hi'iiv carpenter!

I '>r Sadie lived with the same familiar pain of loss as he iliiI I lie
realization swept over him, and he felt sorry for his ttiuliivalent feelings
toward his own flesh and blood . . , even ulittr nil these years of her absence
and her defiant refusal to

I \kv recompense here at home, where it most mattered.

"Will ya write and remind her of what she must do?" he i I-ml I be bishop.

The burly man leaned on the baler and looked him iillicit in the face. "I'm
sure you miss her and I can't blame vi lor it. I'll write her what's expected. If
she's yielded and u'ipchMo, I'll let you know." '.: : ' :

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Stunned at the change in the bishop's attitude, Ahrmn nodded. "I'll wait to
hear from you. Denki!" :

The older man headed out toward the sinking sun. Tim, almost as if he'd forgotten to say what was still on his mind he turned and asked, "How will this affect Leah, do ya think? - " And your young children, too?"

Abram inhaled sharply. "Once you hear back from my cousin, I'll speak with Leah, break it to her . . . somehow. Then she and I will decide what to tell Lydiann and Abe."

"I'll drop by again. I 'spect it'll be soon."

Sadie needs us now, he thought. Surely she'll abide by her Ordnung this time.

He watched as the bishop made his way toward his barn, wondering how to go about telling Leah, when it was time* I have some fences to mend, he thought ruefully.

Leah sat down in the kitchen with Dat, who had come in ; from the barn midafternoon, removed his straw hat, and placed it slowly on the table. "I have some news for ya, Dat," Breathing deeply, he sat next to her on the wooden bench, "Your sister's comin' home with the bishop's blessing. She says she wants to repent."

"My sister?" Her heart leaped up. Sadie's returning to us!

Dat continued, explaining the letter and visit of a week ago, the bishop's follow-up all of it. Leah hung on every word, yet wondered why her father's somber face did not match his joyful words. "What's wrong, Dat? Why are ya sad?"

He faltered just then, staring long at the floor. When he

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PPPki'iI up, the color had drained from his face. "Truth is, she's < ..nun' hack a widow."

I In- I horny words narrowly stuck in her mind. M)> sister, a
tl'lilrl'll1.'

She studied Dat, struggling with the meaning of this. So ^mus must be dead.

H[I);ii was talking again, but she scarcely heard a word.

HjiH 111ing that had been buried so long ago broke free within

' ' Years of innocent pretense, of hoping and striving . . .

uiiiiig to forgive Sadie and praying it was so. All of it sim-

iihI in the surface in that moment, and no longer could she

11 "in I lack the tide. She put her head down and sobbed on her

HIM:

I >;it reached out to comfort her. "There, there, my lamb," Mfehaid, the way Mamma always had. "This, too, shall pass." ^B Powerless to think of anything but her own loss of Jonas, ^m raised her head, eyes clouded with tears. "Nee no!" she ^ftU'd. "My sister took my beau . . . my beloved. Don't you Hr She stole the years that were meant for me for Jonas fill me! Now he's i^ad, gone forever!"

^m I 'at's face fell, plainly dumbfounded at her outburst. ^E'lih. . . ?" His eyes were intent on her, a concerned frown his face.

M Beneath his gaze, she felt as foolish as a young child. Yet r was crushed to near despair.

Abram, taken aback by Leah's outburst, had never seen In i so distraught, neither so outspoken. Promptly he stopped living to calm her, feeling

inadequate to do so. I should've had Lizzie to be on hand, he thought.

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Never had he felt comfortable when it came to a woman. Here Leah was, unable to dry her tears, beside him with fresh grief over Sadie's betrayal. Just when he had been so sure she was long past her anger and sadness.

He wondered how to make things better, how to place ultimate blame where it belonged. He contemplated her of his conversation with Jonas, the two of them hidden away in the cornfield the day of Leah's and Jonas's baptism. Such a confession might redirect Leah's resentment- and rightly so.

He rose to stretch his legs and move about the kitchen, to give himself a chance to think how he ought to reveal his deception, beginning with his furtive phone call to David Mellinger clear back when Jonas first began courting Leah, when she was merely sixteen. And . . . ending with Mast's visit over a year later, when Abram had spoken harsh truths, not putting to rest the rumor that there was some kind of more than innocent friendship between Gid and Leah. All of his subtle scheming to keep Jonas away far removed to ruin Leah. For what purpose? So Smithy Gid could have a chance, nothing more. Clearly from Leah's apparent anguish, he had been decidedly wrong on all counts.

Inhaling slowly, he felt he must open up to her, to confess at least in part. "There's something you oughta know. I should've told ya, oh, so long ago."

She looked at him, visibly puzzled, eyes red.

"I'm mighty sorry," he began again. "From the deep of my heart, I am."

She remained silent.

"Jonas marrying your sister was partly my fault," he said.

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I "Your fault? How can that be?" :

I lie was pacing now. I regret the day I ever meddled with her
mnv, lie thought. Leah's a maidel now because of me.

I "Dat? What is it?" Leah asked, her pretty brow lined with
lip concern.

I "Nan" he began. "I was a fool. .. ."

I A bewildered look crossed her face, yet it was evident she
pnivd to understand, to hear him out. "Whatever do ya
Lm, Dat?"

I I le stood near the wood stove, feeling mighty chilled; he
liln'i dare consider sitting at the table any longer, so far from
F

|i ilow fire in the belly of the stove. No, he needed the

Inmib. As it was, he could barely relax the muscles in his |w I'nough to
speak, to make his mouth form the words that In .1 finally be said.

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Not only was Leah perplexed at the idea of Sadie's returning home, she was dismayed to think Dat had created feeling of doubt in Jonas regarding her faithfulness to him, shedding more than a little suspicion on Leah's companionable association with Gid!

She recalled the alarming letter Jonas had sent so long ago, asking her pointed questions about Smithy Gid. In Jonas had gotten his doubts about her from Dat, of all people. Still, what part had Sadie played in this? Leah had not fully understood the ins and outs of Peter Mast's visit here till

autumn day as described by Dat, and she wondered if her father was holding back other things he'd rather not say; she could only imagine what they might be.

Nevertheless, Sadie was soon to be traveling home, and Leah needed to make some necessary sleeping arrangements. She asked Dat if he'd mind moving downstairs to the spare bedroom off the front room, and he agreed immediately, giving up the largest of the bedrooms to Leah and Lydiann, while he didn't mind sharing the room over the kitchen, the warmest

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In the house. Even if Sadie had more than one or two children, in no way did Leah feel comfortable handing over Dat and Mamma's bedroom to their disobedient teenager and her offspring. Jonas and Sadie's little ones . . . In Leah's and Mary Ruth's former bedroom would become Leah's and her children's, since it was the farthest removed from the barn, Leah's new bedroom a good idea, she thought. Abe, in his heart, would have Leah's old room, with its lovely view of the barnyard and the woods.

When it was decided, and she was glad Dat never questioned her decision. Each of them would have a place to call his or her own, and Leah would still be near enough to Lydiann and Peter, to look after them a bit.

In Leah's room helped her wash down the walls and redde up the room for Dat, and he promptly moved his clothing and personal items the next day.

When all the changes had been made and the rooms were ready on Saturday, Leah put a pot of chicken corn soup on the stove for supper, then asked Lily to watch and stir it every so often. Lily noticed a whole flock of wild turkeys two dozen or more strutting around the barnyard and even more of them in the cornfield, finding leftovers from the harvest, as she headed up to the woods to visit Hannah. Once there, she was happy to see petite and sweet Ida Mae who, at almost three, was as chatty and fair as Mary Ruth had always been. "She even looks like your twin when she was tiny!" Leah said, to which Hannah agreed.

Katie Ann, the other wee dishwasher in the making, was likely to be napping. "She does so twice a day now, which is

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right nice," Hannah said, pushing back a loose strand of strawberry blond hair.

Leah got down on the floor and played with Ida Mae, while she was talking to the knitted-sock hand puppet Hannah had made. It was one Leah had used through the years to soothe hurt or ailing children at Dr. Schwartz's medical clinic.

"Should we plan something special for our lost sister when she returns?" Hannah asked.

She would not share with Hannah how despairing she felt about Sadie. "Maybe so" was all she said.

"Wouldn't it be fun? A right nice welcome home."

Leah rose and headed for the door, struggling with a lump in her throat.

"You just got here," Hannah called to her. "What's your hurry?"

"I thought of walking in the woods, that's all." She didn't say she needed some time alone, that she felt all this pressure in her chest might cause her to suffocate.

"Aw, Leah, come back. Are ya sad over Preacher Yodci';. passing?"

"I ... I'll see ya later." Right then she felt sorry about being short with Hannah, but she couldn't stay a minute longer, not if she didn't want to be seen weeping.

Hurrying out the back door, she rushed past the stone wall and gardens, noticing that the recent killing frost had put an end to Hannah's late-summer flowers. But Leah didn't stop to sit there and try to calm herself. She hastened on, trying in vain to locate her cherished honey locust tree, for too many years had come and gone since the bliss-filled hour, spent beneath its trunk.

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She pressed on, looking anxiously for her favorite tree,

where of geese overhead, honking their way south for the winter, Eventually unable to find her way to her former piece of

land, she headed up a ways to the crest of the hillock, to the little hunter's shanty, surprised it was still standing though I might rely that.

Deciding against going inside, she wandered around and I'd hiked for a place to sit where she could be alone with the lowering trees and the dense foliage, soaking up the peace I'd need. She found a cluster of boulders, recalling this to be the place where Smithy Gid had found her the day she'd wandered alone and gotten herself lost. Not worried that such a thing would occur again, she sat herself down. So Hannah wants to have a party, but Sadie deserves no such thing.

A scampering squirrel stopped to look at her, his tiny head lightly cocked as if to say, Hello, lonely Leah. What're you doing here in my woods!

She realized she still had an imagination, probably thanks in part to the strong influence of the children and her children. How she loved them! Cheerful yet

outspoken Lydiann . . . and Abe, who was always caring, eager, and confident. Both seemed mighty glad to have her as a mamma and often said SO.

But she best not think on such prideful things; she didn't need the children's reassurance. She just needed to simmer down like the kettle full of soup at home.

I've lost Jonas twice. She let the harsh truth seep into her bones. Once to Sadie and now to death, both in the space of nine

years. ; : > ' . .

She felt she'd aged in just a few days of grieving Jonas's

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death. Holding her slender hands out before her, she peered at small veins protruding through pale skin. It's a good thmr Smithy Gid woke up and married Hannah, she thought, feclinr at once sorry for herself, yet knowing what a happy coupl> Gid and Hannah were.

Looking up, she tried to see the sky, but only the tinicii dots of light shone through the canopy. She was taken anew by the quietude and suddenly missed her youth, gone with thfl

years. m

When she heard whistling, she turned to see where thfl sound hailed from, and there was Aunt Lizzie tramping toward her. "Hullo, honey-girl!"

"Out for an afternoon walk?" she asked, glad to see her.

"Been trampin' through these woods for a gut many ye;n:> now; don't 'spect I'll quit anytime soon." Lizzie came and s:it next to her on the boulder. "I daresay you aren't walkin' so much as thinkin'."

She knows me through and through.

"Your sister's comin' home and you're beside yourscll, ain't?"

"That'd be one way of puttin' it."

"Well, best get it out of your system before she arrives." Lizzie mopped her brow with the palm of her hand.

"How would ya say I oughta go 'bout that?"

Lizzie straightened a bit, pushing her work shoes down deep into the leaves and vines. "Lean hard on the Lord, honey-girl."

Wondering, she voiced the question aloud. "Does God truly know how I'm feelin' just now?" : '.

Lizzie started a little and looked Leah full in the face. "He

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V th In time of suffering you're goin' through . . . that it's

1 il linril. But this must be His plan for you, as difficult as

1 In to understand. Life ain't a bed of roses; it's downright

iflll ut times. But I 'spect if ya get your eyes off yourself

I |i ii k nt your sister, you'll see she's in need of our love now

yyyi'tf Hum ever. A widow and not even thirty yet, for pity's

r"

^H"l (In love her," Leah said softly. "I've prayed for her all ^Hir years. But now I just don't know how I can. . ." She ^ |H-d because she simply couldn't

go on. ^B"Sooner or later, you'll have to forgive her, Leah. The ^Hh of unforgiveness is a thorny one." Aunt Lizzie had ^H)Vvn all along what it was eating away at her. ^H"I wish I didn't have to go to the membership meeting, ^[less my sister kneelin' before the Lord God and the brethH, confessing aloud her past sins." All this time she'd ^HrncJ for this very thing for Sadie's sake; yet here it was ^Hll'ly the eve of such a meeting, and all she wanted to do ^B run far from it. She didn't care to hear the words of ^fntance that would ultimately lift the Bann from Sadie. ^Hc shunned one would be welcomed back, profoundly so, ^0 the warmth of Dat's home, her refuge. ^B "I see now I can't begin to think of voting to accept her ^ftk into the fellowship. I just can't, Lizzie." She wept sad ^us in her birth mother's arms.

^H "There, there, you go 'n' cry it out. Then, when you're ^rough, we'll head on home for supper. We'll see this through Blether, you 'n' me."

* Leah wept good and long. When she'd had her cry, she wiped her face dry with the edge of Lizzie's apron, startlingly

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aware of the bitterness within sorrowful remnants of the past. " " : " " " " "

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Somewhere along the way, they had silently agreed not to talk while milking cows, which was exactly how it was Monday morning. Leah felt she had little to say to Dat.

They finished the milking, and while her father carried away the cans of fresh milk to the milk house, Leah headed back to her indoor chores. From now on, she decided, A he, or Sadie once she arrived could help with the milk inn, She, on the other hand, was in charge of the house and by mi means ready to give up her place of responsibility and authority, under God and Dat, to her elder sister. Sadie did not deserve that place of honor. She'd abandoned this family 111 have her own will and way with her life. And now, if she w;m to come home, Leah felt strongly about making sure Sadie knew where things stood certainly no longer could she hold the honored

place of Abram's eldest daughter. No, Sadie had forfeited that standing, no two ways about it.

Late in the afternoon Adah surprised Leah by stopping by, once all her wash had been dried and folded. She came alone, all smiles, with a "wonderful-gut idea. Let's have a card shower for your sister." Her eyes were bright with the suggestion. "If ya want, I could help out with some cold cuts and

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wl nil i ml, I urn it into a coming-home party and invite as many M llic women folk who'd wanna come." She offered, as well,

Efi i>rnKl the news. t

I "Well, since we don't know exactly when she's comin',

lyliy not wait to see if she actually does."

I Adah frowned quickly. "Do ya mean to say she might

huNge 'ler rnind?"

I Leah shrugged her shoulders. "How should I know? It's

I hi ii a long time. . . ."

I Nodding, Adah patted her arm. "We'll bide our time, if iliiii's what you want to do."

Leah didn't have the heart to say much more, and she MilJn't help but wonder how Mamma would expect her to i n-.ii Sadie after all this time. Sooner or later, like Aunt Lizzie

11.ii I said, Leah knew she would have to unearth the merciless iiuI hitter root deep within and look at it for what it was. Wluitever pain may come of this, for Mamma's sake, I must . /loose to be kind. . . . ,...

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.Leah spied her first Sadie plodding up the long lane, carry ing only a tan suitcase. She looked smaller somehow, weighed down by the cares of life and her bulky luggage. Her drsrsn hung too loosely, as if she'd lost weight suddenly, and her hnit was blonder than Leah remembered, the gleam of it peekiiif: out from beneath her prayer veiling. But then again, maybe i I was simply the light cast by the sun at high noon.

Leah paused where she was, standing nearly like a statue, bewildered to witness this moment alone. Where's Dat? she

wondered, thinking she ought to call for him and Dawdi John or Aunt Lizzie all of them, really.

But she felt the sound of her own voice would have heightened the peculiarity of the moment, making her feel weak, even powerless. She battled against her own reluctance but could not call out even a welcome to her sister; instead, she managed to raise a hand in a feeble wave. Here was the sister she had thought she'd forgiven. Good thing Sad it' hadn't looked up right then, noticed her standing there in hei old brown choring dress and apron, wearing a pair ol

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Mmma's worn-out shoes. Good thing, because she'd probably I'i' wondering why Leah wasn't tearing down the path, throwing her arms

around her, saying over and again, "Oh, I missed y;i ever so much, I did. Wonderful-gut to have you home. . . ."

She swallowed the lump in her throat and wondered where Sadie's children were, or at least the one. Had she left I Item, behind in Indiana with close church friends or Jonas's liimily, maybe? If so, did this mean she was merely coming for ii visit, nothing more? Surprised at the sense of calm that tame over her at the latter thought, Leah inhaled deeply and willed herself to move forward.

One step at a time, she made her way down the lane, her legs as stiff as solid planks.

Sadie, seeing her now for the first time, hesitated, then dropped her suitcase and hurried forward. Her arms were outstretched like those of a doll, and her eyes glistened as her embrace found Leah. The bittersweet moment nearly overlook her, so fervently did Sadie enfold her.

"I missed ya so, Leah . . . oh, you just don't know." .

"It's been . . J*a long . . . time" was the best Leah could muster. To mimic the tender words that came from Sadie's lips would have been false and ever so wrong.

Sadie stepped back and, drying her tears, asked, "Where's Smithy Gid?"

A bit surprised, Leah said, "Oh, he's fillin' silo with Sam Ebersol you remember our uncle Jesse's youngest boy? Sam und Adah Peachey are married now."

Sadie nodded, seemingly a bit dazed.

"Didja have to travel long?" asked Leah, bending to pickup the suitcase. ., :
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"First by bus, then by train; then from Lancaster I roilr the trolley back to Strasburg." She stopped and caught I in breath. "After that, I hired a taxi driver to bring me on home."

Leah said nothing as Sadie took in the house, the grounds the barn, and milk house. "So you and Gid, are ya livin' in the main house now? Are Dat and Mamma snug in the Dawill Haus?"

She felt the air go out of her. "What do ya mean Gid andme?" ;.∴ , -; .

"You and your husband, Smithy Gid." =' , : "Why, no. He's married to Hannah." ;.∴ "Hannah?" A quick frown crossed Sadie's brow and she stumbled.

"Watch your step," Leah offered, reaching out a hand.

Sadie grasped it and they walked hand in hand.

"Where are your children?" Leah asked. "We heard yon were expecting a baby back some time ago."

Sadie was quiet as they made their way toward the house. "Stillborn babies were all I ever birthed, Leah . . . same as my first wee son, so long ago."

As sorrowful as Sadie appeared just now, Leah thought she best be thinking how she should tell her sister of Martini si's passing. Sadie must hear the heartrending news before evei encountering either Dat or Aunt Lizzie. It was the compas sionate thing to do.

When they approached the back door, Leah knew she must speak up. She paused on the sidewalk and turned to look at Sadie. "There's something you oughta know ... in case you didn't hear. Believe me, I tried to get word to you."

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Smlic's countenance turned nearly gray.

As upset as Leah was, her heart went out to her sister. "I'm iHvtil sorry to be the one to tell ya, but someone ever so dear punned away a while back. Someone we all loved very much."

Siidie's eyes welled up with tears, and she shook her head. "Nnl Mamma. Please, say it's not my mamma."

Leah breathed in some air for courage. "Jah, Mamma's yolie to Jesus."

Sadie collapsed on the back stoop, her hands over her eyes, head down, sobbing, knees up close to her face. She begun to rock back and forth. "Dear, dear Mamma."

Leah felt compelled to explain further, wanting to comfort I i r sister in this moment; yet she stood without moving, arms hold stiffly behind her back. "Mamma's been gone for many ywirs now. She passed away giving birth to Abe."

Looking up, Sadie blinked her eyes, tears staining her face. "Yfl mean to say, Mamma had another child after Lydiann?" Sudie frowned with wonder. "I have a baby brother?"

Leah honestly wished there was a better way to catch her up on things than standing here on the back stoop. "Well . . . Abe's not such a baby anymore. He's nearly seven will be, rome Christmas." She wished to say more, wanted to set the record straight. Abe wasn't just Sadie's baby brother. In all I ruth, he was Leah's son, only not by birth, just as she had been Mamma's daughter in every way that truly mattered.

But hadn't Sadie, travel weary, taken in enough informai ion in the past few minutes? Maybe too much for having just arrived home. That the gaunt young woman before her had suffered more than her share of pain was clearly etched on her lace, beautiful as it still was. - v

"Come in and rest. I'll make you some sweet tea." Le:ili opened the door and held it, then led the way into ilic kitchen.

"That'll hit the spot. Goodness knows, I need something to pick me up." Sadie dried her tears and, sighing loudly, s:ii down on the bench beside the table.

"Once you've had a sip or two, you'll want to go next dooi and say hello to Dawdi John and Aunt Lizzie. Dawdi's up in years and doesn't go out much, but he still tells us some mighty interesting stories. He and Lizzie both are excited 11 > see you, of course. Dat, too, but he must be over at the smithy's, or he would've shown his face by now."

"That's all right. I'll take my tea quietly." Sadie accepted the warm cup and held it between her hands, staring at Leali. "Didja . . . well, I mean, should I ask . . . if you ever married."

Please don't ask this, she thought, unsure how to share any more of the essential things. Leaning her head back, she began. "Long after we heard you were married, nearly two years later, Smithy Gid did court me, but only for a time, When Mamma was dying, she asked me to raise Lydiann and Abe. Honestly, maybe you'd rather not "

"No, no ... I want to know about you, sister. It's been the hardest thing, me bein' separated from my own family for all these years."

Leah continued on, telling how she had made the promizr to care for Mamma's little ones and how that promise had sealed her future as a maidel due to Dat's eagerness to raise his own son and daughter, instead of allowing Gid and Leah to do so. But she didn't care to say much more. It was enough . . . almost, to have Sadie sitting here in the kitchen,

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Leah brewed tea with her, like old times. Enough to have her blue eyes staring and searching hungrily, as if looking-

Leah's gaze, longing to know what she had in store here in her own family's home.

Leah didn't have the heart to go on, though she wished she might tell Sadie how sorry she was Jonas had died so terribly young, leaving her a widow. Awful sorry ...

Leah felt nearly too ill to attend the required membership meeting the Sunday following Sadie's arrival, but she went

anyway, sitting clear in the back, thus allowing herself no

personal memory of repentant Sadie kneeling before the People.

In her ears surely witnessed Sadie's embarrassing, even frank

acts of confession the repeated meetings in the hunter's

lick in the woods, the loss of her illegitimate son. . . . She sighed, wishing to stop up her ears, as well, but surely . . .

And, Sadie's heart was pure before God and the People.

And Sadie hadn't come home to repent just because she was

A widow and all alone in the world.

Leah, nevertheless, had become quite ill with an early autumn flu. The stress of having to vote to receive her estranged sister back into the fold had made her absolutely round the gills, but she did her duty as a church member in good standing. Good thing the ministers can't see into my heart, she thought, despising her own reluctance to forgive and forget.

After the common meal at Uncle Jesse Ebersol's place, where house church had been held, several couples and their

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families followed Dat's carriage back home for a visit. Naomi and Luke Bontrager came with their little boys, as well ait Hannah and Gid and their girls.

Mary Ruth joined all of them after church, as well, just as she'd quickly come to visit on the first evening of Sadie's anv val.

Leah felt some better later in the afternoon and joined the' cheerful group, though she kept to herself, not stepping info her usual role as hostess. No doubt sensing her difficulty, desir Lizzie filled her shoes instead, and Leah pulled up a chair, relieved to simply sit and not lift a finger.

Abe hovered near, evidently not interested in playing with his cousins. Leah was glad for his company and that hi' stood protectively beside her chair for the longest time. Lydiann, however, was her outgoing self, readily engaging the laughter and attention of the big sister she'd never known. Because of the severity of the shunning, neither Lydiann nor Abe could remember hearing Sadie's name uttered in their lifetime. So there was much catching up to be done, and everyone, especially Sadie, seemed to enjoy the spontaneous get-together. They all stayed and talked till milking time, and then disbanded outdoors with Naomi and Sadie weeping in each other's arms, best friends reuniting under the canopy ol heaven.

Dear Lord, please give me the grace I need, Leah pleaded. But the tearful scene was too much for her, and she slipped back into the house to soothe herself yet again.

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Ooon the daily routine Monday washday, Tuesday ironing nnd cleaning took precedence as the newness of Sadie's return began to wear off, at least for Leah. Lydiann, on the other hand, was rather taken with Sadie and followed her wound the house incessantly, Leah noticed.

Early Wednesday morning, while Leah was still making the bed in her room, a firm knock came at the door. "Who's there?" she called, reckoning who it might be.

"It's Sadie."*

Stopping what she was doing, Leah moved toward the door and opened it slowly.

Before her stood her sister, the blue gone from her eyes, washed away by tears. "May I come in?" she asked.

"If it's important enough for you to be cryin', then I 'spect we ought to go outside," she surprised herself by saying. Honestly, she didn't much care to hear Sadie tell of her widowed sorrow, not in the privacy of Leah's bedroom. Not this nearsacred place where Mamma had given up her life for Abe . . . and where Leah had made her important promise.

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"I'm not meanin' to box your ears," Sadie said suddenly "But the way ya talk, you'd think we were gonna have ii mil between us."

Leah hadn't meant to be reckless with her words. "I'll

meet you out front, where we can speak plainly without lu-ln' overheard."

Sadie frowned, seemingly surprised. "All right, then."

Leah closed her door. She took her time finishing up 11 if bed making, even set the green shades straight, eyeing tlinn carefully so they each matched in length across the three win dows on the side facing the woods. All this before ever k\iv ing the house to meet Sadie. ^

"Truth be told, you act like you wish I'd stayed away f(>i ever," Sadie said when they were alone amidst the trees mi the rolling front lawn. "And don't be sayin' otherwise."

There was nothing to add, really. Leah felt if she couldn'i say anything nice, she ought not to say anything at all.

"What's wrong, Leah? Why do you seem to detest me/"

She filled her lungs with air. "Best not talk 'bout it, I'm thinkin'."

"Why? Does it annoy you that I assumed you were married to Smithy Gid? If so, I was only saying what Jonas told m<- years back."

"He told you that?" She was as bewildered now as she hi id been the day his strange letter arrived, followed by total silence once she promptly responded, writing him the truth.

"Several times, jah." : ; : ;'

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^H\ui there was nothing tender between Gid and me, 'least I^Hvlulc 1 was engaged to Jonas." She paused. "Are you f^HniluTin' things correctly did Jonas really say that?" ^B}Vhy, sure he did. Even his father confirmed to Jonas that

|^Bvas sweet on you, that Dat had given his blessing for him

^^Burl' you. All this while you were betrothed to Jonas just

^^B>was completing his carpentry apprenticeship and prepar-

^^g travel home for your wedding."

^^H@ this was what Peter Mast and Dat had secretly dis-

^^Hcl the two of them had destroyed her future with Jonas!

^^Fnmkly," Sadie went on, "at the time, I found it down-

^^H Hlirprisin', but I assumed you'd decided to follow Dat's

^^Bn in the end and marry Gid instead."

^^BThal's ridiculous. You of all people knew how much I

^m Jonas!"

^H*]!ih, I thought I knew that, but I was altogether befuddled

^^H) I saw you and Gid holdin' hands in the woods that day

^Hgot yourself lost up there. Remember?"

^H'You saw what?" She couldn't believe her ears. Sadie was

Tin the he%d!

I Her sister went on, describing the day Gid had gone in

I ni'h of Leah, at Mamma's urging. Sadie told how she herself

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|l< "I tfone into the forest, up to the low stone wall rimming nit Lizzie's log house. "Smithy Gid and you were holding in 'mis and laughin' together. I saw it with my own eyes, so h, m can't deny it."

"You must've told this to Jonas," Leah said, not recalling I In* himd-holding incident whatsoever. "You made me look lltlnithful . . . was that what you did?"

Sadie shook her head, blinking back tears. "I simply told

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him once he asked what I knew 'bout Gid, and only after that You must believe me, Leah. He'd heard, but not from me, tllmi you'd gone to a summertime singing in our barn where you'd linked up with Gid, then walked home with him through I he cornfield."

Again, she was wholly baffled. "I believe I recall that eve ning, but Adah and I went together to the singing. She and I, along with Gid the three of us walked over to the Peach eys' afterward . . . innocent as the day is long."

Sadie touched her elbow. "Ach, Leah, I don't care to brini; up the past. That's not why I say these things. I only won dered why you hadn't married Smithy Gid after Jonas am I I had believed it so strongly."

They were still for a moment as the sun rose higlin through the trees from its dawning place. "I s'pose there's nothin' to be gained by rehashing all this," Leah said, gmp pling with her own words. "We oughta be thinking of you now, sister. Your needs . . . your great loss." She looked at lief brokenhearted sister, sharing the intense sorrow. "How sad lo have lost Jonas that way in the silo accident. I feel right sorry for you . . . him so young and all."

A shadow swept over Sadie's face. "Didja say . . . Jonas/"

Leah nodded, unable to go on, wishing not to visualize 11 ie fatal fall from such a height.

Sadie shook her head slowly. "Oh, Leah ... no wonder, You're sadly mistaken. I haven't seen Jonas in years."

Leah's breath bounded out of her lungs. What on earth . . . , how can this be? "You mean you didn't . . . you never married Jonas at all?" She held herself around the middle, thinking she might be sick then and there.

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I Shaking her head, Sadie appeared as flabbergasted as Leah ill. "Why, no. I married Harvey Hochstetler . . . from Indium-" Sadie began to explain how Jonas had taken care to tfriend her after she'd shared with him the tale of

her wild PUinschprunge. He had gone so far as to begin to date her, "iolcly out of a sense of duty, not love. He and I went our M'pnrte ways the following spring, after I met a boy named Mm Graber, who introduced me to Harvey."

"And what of Jonas? Where is he?" ∴.

Sadie shook her head sadly. "I don't know." "When was the last you heard of him? Where was he

11ifii?" She felt nearly panic-stricken, suddenly aware of the liniTkl string of deceit coupled with misunderstandings. I Inspeakable, for sure and for certain.

"I last saw Jonas in Millersburg. He was preparing to mi >ve, though he never said just where. I assumed he was hoplni; to set up his own carpentry shop somewhere in Ohio, but

I tiin't be sure." Sadie went on. "Bein' shunned ruined his life, In- said. It changed everything . . . made it impossible for him in continue his ties with his family and friends. Jonas once

I1 'Id me he felt like a man without a country. I surely underi"od that."

"So he just disappeared ... is that what you're sayin'?" Iriih sat right down in the grass, her legs incapable of supporting her. She held her hands over her heart, no longer able to deny her tears. "Oh, Sadie, I can't bear to hear any more," *lu> cried. "Please stop. I ... loved him so."

Sadie knelt next to her, wrapping her arms around her. "I'm sorry for comin' between you and Jonas," she whispered, leaning her head against Leah's. "I should've known you and

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Smithy Gid were merely good friends. I shoulJ've : known. ..." |

Like a breeze blowing the memory of that day gently h;n k,| the treacherous hike out of the deepest part of the wi >di j became clear in Leah's mind. She recalled well-meaning Utsfj reaching for her hand several times, steadying her when shf j felt nearly too weak to walk, having strayed through thff immense tangle of the woods, wandering for hours. He hafilj merely protected her as a big brother. Nothing more. 1

But there were no words now to speak the truth of it l:fl; Sadie. Instead, she wept in her big sister's arms for the IonH years, for her resentment toward Sadie, who had been caughtj in a maze of misconceptions. Her heart ached, as well, for ihif long-ago sweetheart she would never see again. Dear Jonas. , r gone forever. Leah felt as if her very life was being driven from her. i

Whispering now, Sadie said, "Do you remember wluiti Mamma used to tell us? 'God knows the end from the begin*!ning.'" j

How on earth could the Lord God know such a thing, iisi Mamma had oftentimes said, and yet allow what had happened lu] take placel The end from the beginning. Leah had missed being 1Jonas's loving wife by a series of errors. Nothing more.

After a time, when the sadness and disbelief had spillnl j forth in a great veil of tears Sadie comforting her through ilj all Leah dried her eyes and kissed her sister. "The grapeviu^f had it all wrong 'bout you and Jonas," Leah said softly, sfila puzzled by the absolute certainty of the news they'd receivafj over the years. t

Sadie spoke up, attesting to the fickleness of gossip. "No j

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wonder you've despised tittle-tattle your whole life," she u'liiiiikcd, to which Leah could only nod her throbbing head.

rl)i:i-rher, the two of them rose slowly and walked hand in hflrul I < ward the house. Sadie's return is both an end and a begin' illnjt j<" ws all, Leah thought, hoping it would be so when all i. -:iKl and done. She was mindful

to breathe deeply, willing Im i headache away. The children would be hungry for breaki ' i .null, and she must wear a smile for them.

Hnl it was Sadie who was smiling broadly now. "What do , ' .iy i! I help Dat and Lydiann with the milkin' from here

ii i .ill :'

"Well, now, are ya sure, sister?"

"That's one chore you should never have to do again. Alici all these years."

I rah was surprised but pleased. "Sounds quite all right to in. I'll be glad to cook breakfast and pack the children's lunch pails." With Sadie's offer to do the milking chores, I rah realized they'd reversed roles from childhood. Not only I luil, hut she and Sadie were both single women, without husllitinIs or hope of any. Together under the same roof, she tlit >ij'lii", finding the notion almost humorous in a strange sort til way, recalling the saying, "Too many cooks spoil the hinih."

With that she carried stacked firewood for the cook stove

Ilill11 he kitchen, where she was met by the sound of Lydiann's cKpivssive voice. Sitting at the table, Lydiann carefully pracIII'ell I he poem she was expected to recite at school today.

"My Father, what am I that all Thy mercies sweet, like Miiuli^hl- fall so constant o'er my way? That thy great love

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should shelter me, and guide my steps so tenderly thnnii'h every changing day?"

Leah could not simply stand there and overhear the iniili of the rhymed verse, spoken so clearly by her young chiifr Honestly, she couldn't help herself; she smiled. Quickly pu.-.li ing the wood into the belly of the stove, she hurried in Lydiann's side. "God's mercies are new every morning, iim'i so?" she found herself saying as she slipped her arm an mini her.

Looking up at her with shining eyes, Lydiann said, "Yum must've heard me sayin' my poem, Mamma."

"Indeed I did, and I hope you never forget those piii words, 'cause they're ever so true." Leah's heart was filial anew with love for her dear ones. She kissed her girl's Ionhead and rose to make pancakes, eager for this shining new day.

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h' nearly Christmastide again, and Hannah continues to

i'iiy about her new little one coming so close to Abe's sev'

Mill birthday Mamma's going-to-Glory date. I wish she

mil I Must the Good Lord more. Fortunately Sadie's home-

'iiHii|4 has seemed to help Hannah some. Actually, all of us

" I >ri ler in spirit since Sadie's return to Gobbler's Knob.

I i;ii and I had a much-needed talk following her return. I1.; 'ill I nut and befuddled, I expressed my disappointment over iIm ink' he had played in Jonas's and my breakup. His keen l> -iic lor Smithy Gid "to have his chance" was the culprit. . . iIn uiie and only motivation for my father's deception. Ever . > adamant about my choice of a mate, he sadly shared with

11if i bat he had lost his head to dogged aspiration, and one \vii >ng turn had simply led to another. In the end, Dat pleaded my pardon, and I surrendered to his open arms, with a clearer pii lure of the past. Some might say I have every right to carry ,i grudge, but an unforgiving spirit eventually destroys the mil, and I have better things to do.

This week Dat and Smithy Peachey are out chopping

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wood with a group of other men, filling up the woodshed-, round Gobbler's Knob while the women folk have been swap ping dozens of cookies and recipes, everything from snowball¹, and coconut cookies to snickerdoodles and whoopie pies.

I try never to think of Jonas any longer. Knowing him, he's happily married and busy with his carpentry work, wiith plenty of little mouths to feed. I have to admit I'm glad In didn't end up with Sadie, because then, who knows, he might've been helping to build that silo, same as Harvey "Hochstetler was the day he died. Who's to know really, excepti f the Lord. He knows the end from the beginning and sees 4 Jonas Mast and his dear ones wherever they are. 'Tis not Im* i me to ponder. j

The gray pallor of grief has flown away; I know this to In¹ true. There was a spring in my step early this morning as I ¹ donned my boots and trudged through the snow to scalier I feed for the small birds that stay with us during winter. While J out in the crisp air, I noticed the hydrangea bushes bare J against the side of the house. How Mamma loved their color- J ful summertime clusters! Yet each autumn they shed their j pretty pink blossoms, and next year's buds lie dormant on the j bough, waiting to burst forth and bloom again. I

As for Aunt Lizzie's remark to me in the woods, I'm mak- ¹ ing a conscious effort to keep my eyes off myself and whai I had viewed as a rather bleak future as a maidel, once Lydiann and Abe are grown, that is. I'm looking more compassionately on Sadie helping her walk through yet another Proving I because of our severe bishop. He's setting her up as an exam- i pie for other young people, just as she always worried he ! would.

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Preacher Yoder's death left a mighty big hole in our midst. Wti had ordination for the new minister back in October, a (v tk following Sadie's kneeling confession. The divine selecih in the lot fell on Smithy Gid, so he's become Preacher l'i mliey now, which gets Lydiann's tongue tied up at times. I

11 ill I her to simply call him Brother Gid, and she does.

I)at's standing up more and more to the bishop and begin'

>.nir in talk to the Lord on his own, is what Aunt Lizzie tells

"" 'he and Dat still go round and round sometimes, fussing

vcr ihe least things. I guess she feels she must keep Mamma's

> 'tk'ls alive with her own voice.

Yesterday Abe came bouncing home from school with a

npiiiire verse on his lips. " 'Be not conformed to this

ill in," he said, eyes big as buttons. To which Sadie nodded

In i head, genuinely in agreement. Her motto these days, and

li> ii'lls it to the children every other minute seems to me, is

11 u i he wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal

< 'nine spring and the first song of the robin, I will go in

I'tlivh of the phoney locust tree. I'll take Lydiann and Abe

id Hip; and introduce them to the beauty and the tranquility of

i lie ik-i'p forest make some new memories. And when berry-

|i|i'kiiiK i ime creeps up on us again, we'll go and pick a pail of

lull y ripe strawberries and bake some strawberry-rhubarb pies

lui mi other reason than that they taste so wonderful-gut.

\lici all, desserts are supposed to be plenty sweet.

I airly I find myself staring far less at the night sky, conii'ni| lai ing the number of stars, than I do counting the smiles -nl yJiaim's and Abe's faces, the dear ones Mamma gave to nit--. Providence, some might say. I call it love, plain and simI.le.

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I t >ffer heartfelt thanks to each research assistant and prayer I'iirtner, for each helpful encounter, and for each wonderful prison who gave expert advice in the thrilling journey mission of writing this book.

Fondly I think of Eli and Vesta Hochstetler of Berlin,

* >!no, who opened their hearts and delightful bookstore to me ln.si full, and who drove me to visit a working blacksmith shop ilivp in Amish country. Thank you! Great appreciation also cues io the young Amish smithy who gave a crash course in

I1 u- art of shoeing horses.

I lank and Ruth Hershberger were a tremendous help, inviting me to their lovely Sugar Creek home and answering numerous questions, including Amish ins and outs of "going uii ;i lark" and "pest hunts." I am truly grateful!

Monk and Marijane Troyer discovered information regarding the horse disease the "strangles," as well as other vital information. Thanks for inviting me to a joyful evening of fellowship with your newlywed son and daughter-in-law. I enjoyed every minute of Monk's storytelling, as well.³⁴⁹ My thanks to Sandi Heisler, who graciously offered medical information regarding home births and midwives.

A big thank-you to Aleta Hirschberg and Iris Jones, my Kansas aunties, who shared their memories of Saturday-night baths in a large galvanized tub. And to Priscilla Stoltzfus, who helped with many Amish-related questions.

As always, to my devoted friends in Lancaster County Amish country who help with research but who wish to remain anonymous ... I am forever indebted. May the Lord bless each of you abundantly!

I am so appreciative of my publisher, Gary Johnson, whose wit and wisdom brighten our days, and whose ongoing vision and prayers make books like this one possible.

Many thanks to my superb editors. To Carol Johnson, who knows my readers as well as anyone and who is a treasured friend indeed. To Rochelle Gloege, a remarkable editor who makes my writing sing. And to David Horton, whose astute perspective and attention to the nitty-gritty details are so vital.

To Steve Oates, Bethany's VP of Marketing, and his amazing team, an enormous thank you for the earnest prayers, behind-the-scenes work that gets my books into the hands of readers, and for Steve's perpetual humor, a welcome relief from the stress of writing deadlines!

To my faithful (and affectionate) readers, who offer a wealth of encouragement. Every letter and email message is read with keen interest and appreciation.

My dear family is my underpinning of support. Much love and gratitude to my husband, Dave, for his tender encouragement and practical help. To Julie, Janie, Jonathan, and Ariel³⁵⁰ for their infectious smiles, energizing

food, and solid editorial n H H ii. And I'm ever grateful to my wonderful parents, Herb tiid |;ine Jones, whose life and ministry of faith are the heritiij;c ihat has brought me this far. Thanks for your persistent I'layers, Dad and Mother, so critical to my writing journey.

I'l'i itally I offer up my heart anew to my dear Lord Jesus, who has called me to walk with Him all the days of my life.³⁵¹ Watch for Book 4,

The Prodigal, in October 2004.

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